

NOVEL

1



7th TIME LOOP

The Villainess Enjoys a Carefree Life
Married to Her Worst Enemy!

Written by Touko Amekawa ♦ Illustrated by Wan☆Hachipisu



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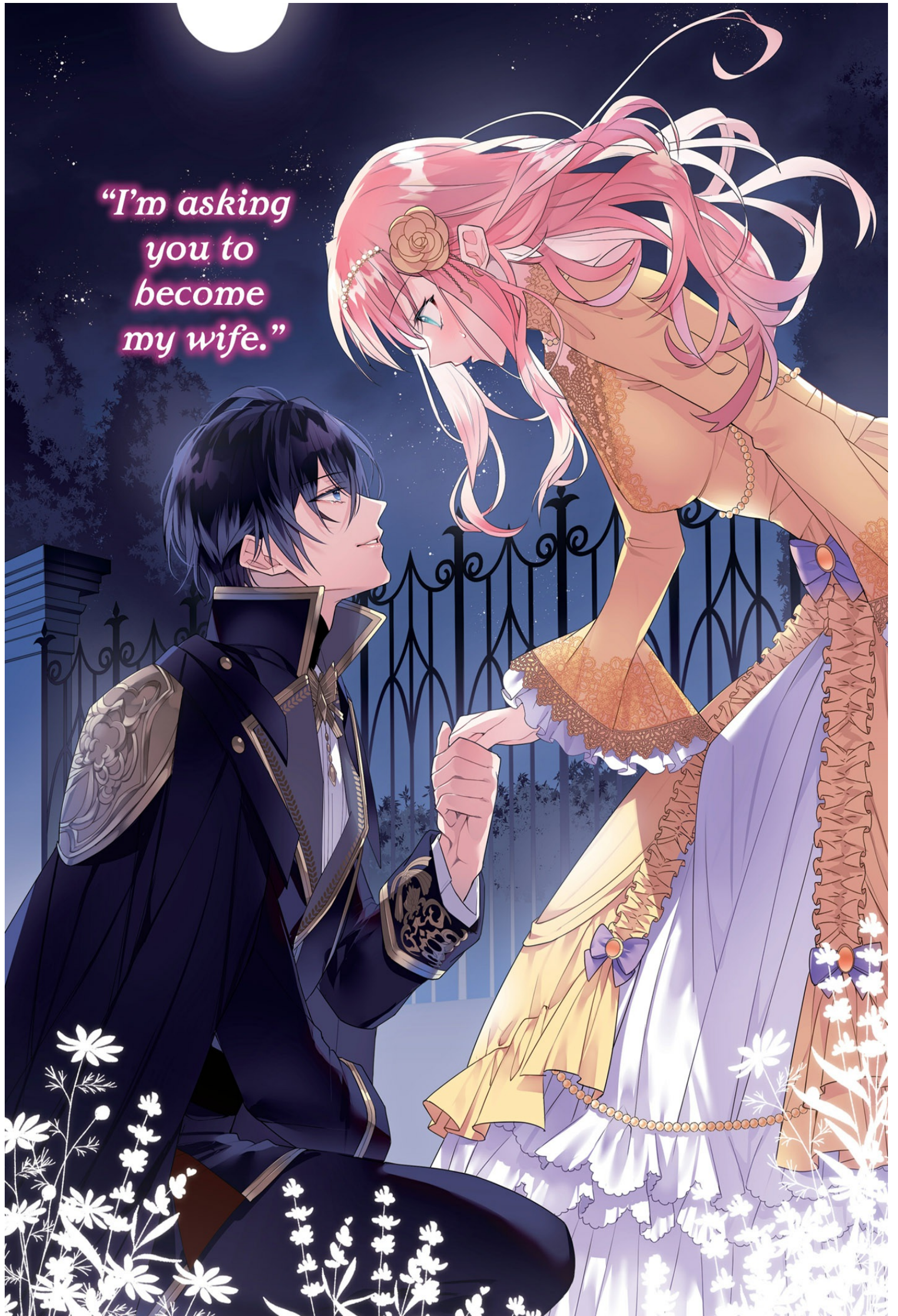
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*"I'm asking
you to
become
my wife."*





Arnold Hein

Crown prince of a military nation, known for being coldhearted and cruel. He killed Rishe in her previous life, but this time, he's taken an interest in her and suddenly asked for her hand in marriage.

Oliver

Arnold's attendant. Taken into Arnold's employ when his dreams of knighthood were crushed due to an injury.

Elsie

A new maid serving under Rishe. Grew up in the slums.

Kaine Tully

An up-and-coming merchant and head of the Aria Trading Company.

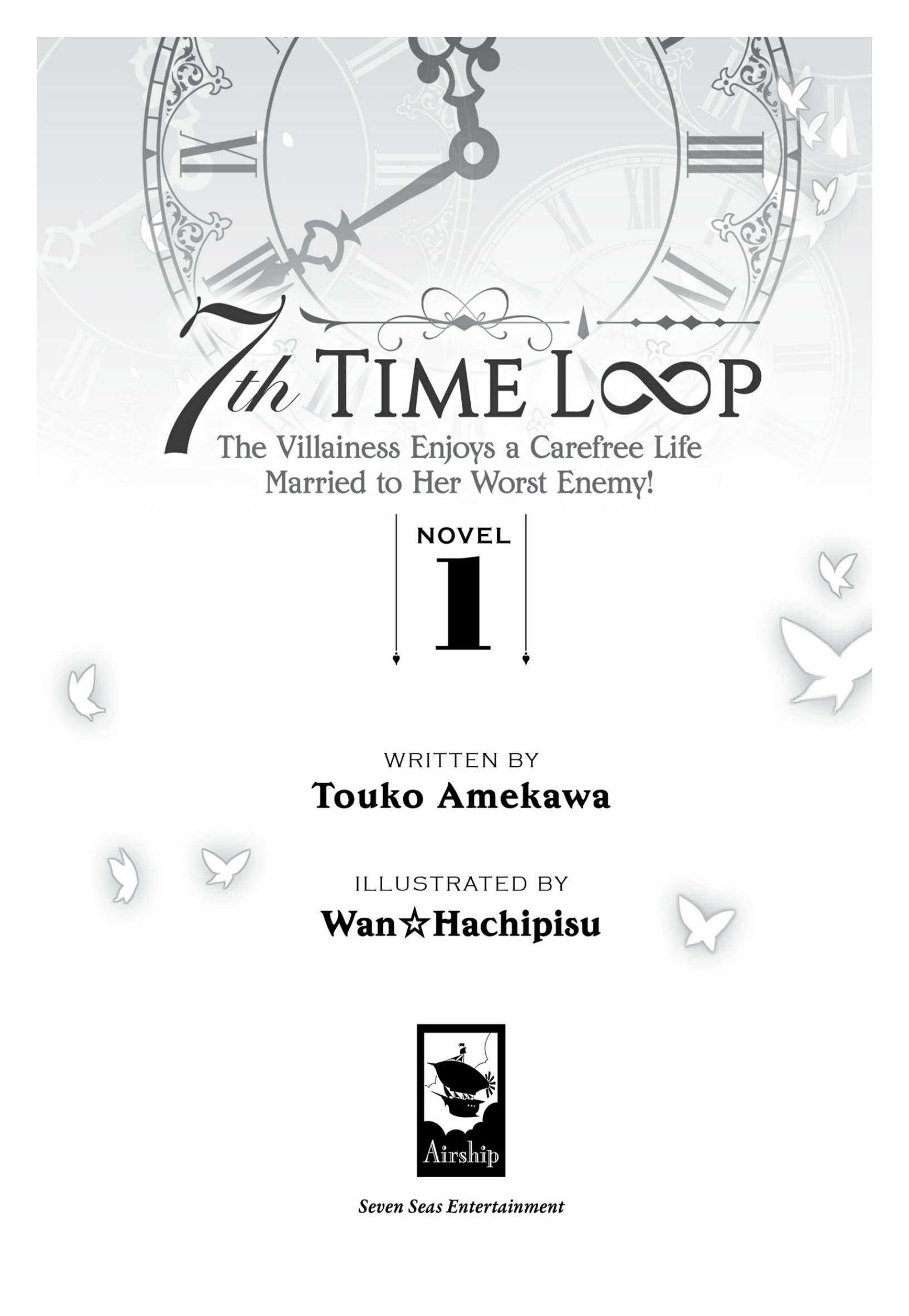
Rishe Irmgard Weitzner

A young woman who keeps dying at twenty and rewinding to her broken engagement at age fifteen. This is her seventh loop.



Arnold remained unruffled, evading her next scheme like it was nothing. He grinned down at her, his eyes shining with a dare.

At the party...



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ILLUSTRATED BY

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Seven Seas Entertainment

7TH TIME LOOP: THE VILLAINESS ENJOYS A CAREFREE LIFE
MARRIED TO HER WORST ENEMY! VOL. 1

Rūpu 7-kai-me no Akuyaku Reijō wa, Moto Tekikoku de Jiyū Kimamana
Hanayome Seikatsu o Mankitsu suru Vol. 1

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TRANSLATION: Julie Goniwich

ADAPTATION: Aysha U. Farah

COVER DESIGN: H. Qi

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: T. Anne

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori

PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein

PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold

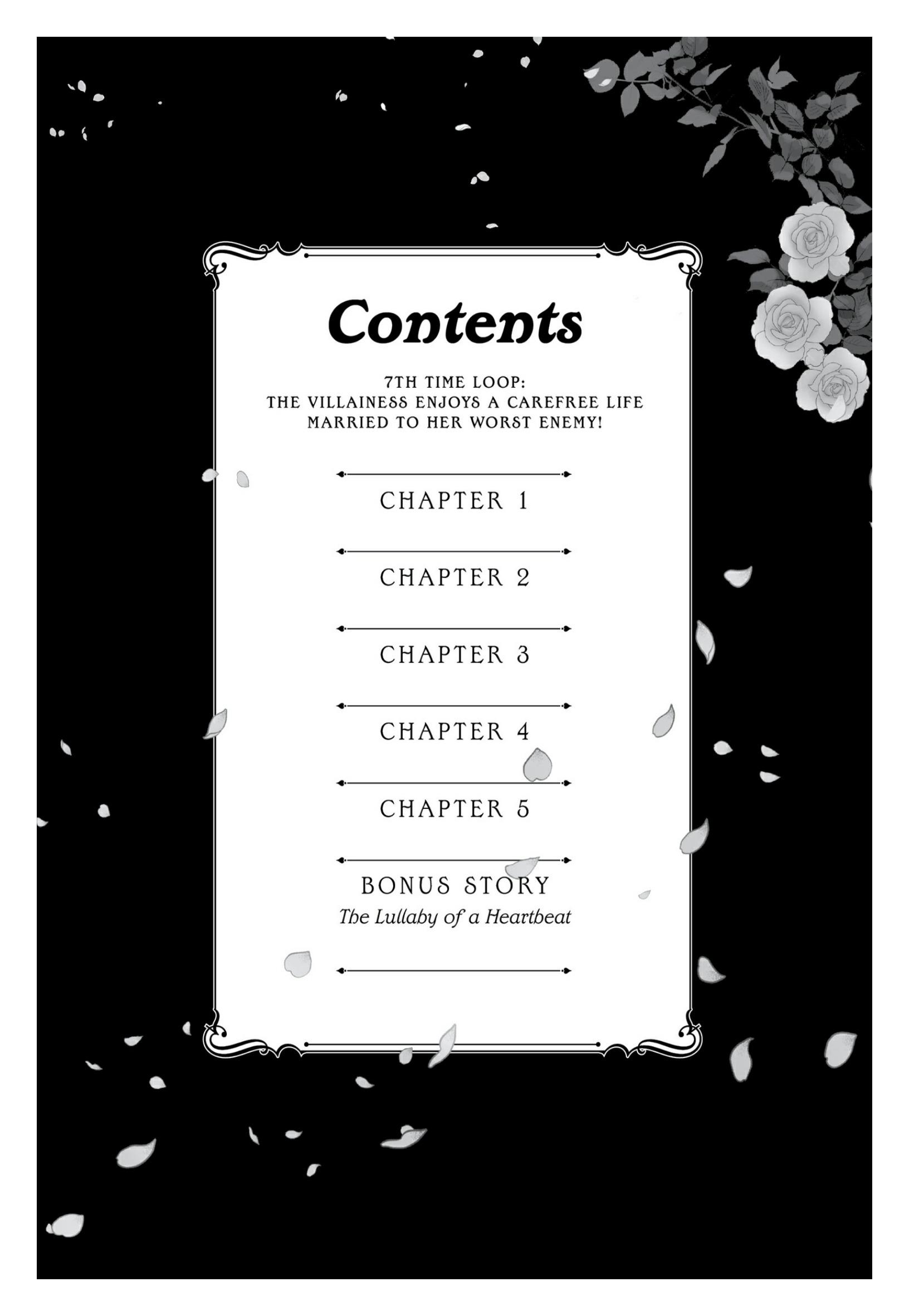
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Chapter 1

“RISHE IRMGARD WEITZNER! You are a vile woman! A truly malicious creature unworthy of the crown prince! As of this instant, our engagement is off!”

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

“...Huh?”

The prince’s declaration echoed throughout the ballroom. Rishe, the duke’s daughter, bowed in response, her coral-toned hair swaying gracefully. The assembled guests found themselves captivated by her dignified beauty. Despite having just witnessed a broken engagement, they couldn’t bring themselves to pity her.

Slowly, Rishe lifted her head and fixed the prince with a pale-emerald gaze. It caught him off guard, but he quickly recovered.

“Didn’t you hear what I just said?! I’m calling off our engagement! Doesn’t that trouble you?”

“Not really.”

Rishe already knew what happened next: false accusations, exile, and her family severing all ties and leaving her to survive on her own. She turned from the prince. There was no point wasting any time.

This is my seventh loop, after all.

Rishe had done this all before.

The next few hours will be busy. I must hurry and retrieve my things before I’m barred from the family estate. I don’t want this to be one of the times I’m too slow and I have to start my new life with nothing.

“Rishe, halt and hear me! I have spent the past week perfecting my recitation of your crimes!”

I should take more than dresses this time—there’s plenty of things I could use out in the world. What trade should I take up? In my first life, I was a merchant. In my second, an apothecary. I’ve got a few more I want to try out... Augh! If

time's just going to keep resetting, I wish I could start at an earlier point. I need more time to prepare!

“Wait! Rishe!”

The crown prince was on the verge of tears, and the spectators struggled to suppress their snickers.

A thought occurred to Rishe, and she stopped. She then turned, her eyes gleaming beneath long lashes as she stared down her ex-fiancé. “Ah, Your Highness, I almost forgot.”

“Yes, tell me!” the prince fumed. “Let me guess, you are hurt beyond measure and yet love me still...correct?”

As *if*. Rishe was grateful to be granted her freedom. In fact, she was smiling as she said, “I hope you and Lady Mary are happy together.”

“What?!”

“May we both lead fulfilling lives. Farewell!” Rishe lifted the skirts of her evening gown and turned on her heel, departing as briskly as she could.

“How do you know about Mary? I haven’t told you I love her!” The prince was shouting something behind her, but she paid him no mind. She had things to do.

During her first loop, the prince’s accusations had shocked her to the core and she—foolishly so—had attempted to defend herself. Now she knew better than to expect the prince to behave reasonably.

How will life unfold this time? I’m excited to find out! Rishe fixed her mind on the future.

This is my seventh “do-over.” I’ve led happy and carefree lives before, but this time—this time, I swear I’ll live a long happy and carefree life!

In other words, she needed to avoid getting killed. At any cost.

In the first loop, with her engagement broken and her reputation in tatters, Rishe roamed with nothing but the clothes on her back. Fortuitously, she met a

merchant caravan willing to buy her jewelry. Finding them a good-natured band, she hitched a ride to a neighboring country.

From the merchant caravan, she learned a trade, studying how to procure stock and balance ledgers. Eventually, she set out on her own to travel the world. Her upbringing as a daughter of the nobility meant that, even at fifteen years old, Rishe possessed a keen sense for beauty.

She collected things that caught her eye and sold them to whoever found delight in her wares. Before she realized it, she had become a major vendor, employing a full staff. She had even done business with the king of a desert nation and the prince of a frozen country up north. She traveled to many distant places, realizing a dream born from her cossetted former life spent doing nothing but preparing to be queen.

Five years passed, and just as she had only one country left to visit, Rishe fell victim to the war sweeping across the continent.

The next thing she knew, she was fifteen years old again and back at that party, with the prince poised to make his pronouncement.

“Rishe Irmgard Weitzner! You are a vile woman! A truly malicious creature unworthy of the crown prince! As of this instant, our engagement is off!”

Naturally, she didn’t understand what was going on at first. She looked around. Everything was the same. She stood in the same place wearing the same dress and draped in the same jewelry she’d sold to the caravan.

Was it a dream? Or was everything that had happened up until then the dream? In her confusion, all she could do was stare.

Rishe hurried out of the ballroom, the impending threat of exile hanging over her and the prince’s entreaties to halt ringing in her ears.

This is perfect! Now I can get it right! I’ll grab everything valuable from my room.

Rishe had enjoyed her life as a merchant, but she had always felt a stirring of regret about this night. If only she’d brought some funds from home, she would’ve had the capital to establish her business much sooner!

Speaking of this regret always prompted disbelief from her customers, including the king of the desert. “What? *That’s* what you’d want to do over?!”

When she arrived back at home on the night of her second life, Rishe grabbed her jewelry box and as many of the books her late grandmother had left her as she could carry, then made haste to the forest to meet the caravan. But the stop at her house took time, and she missed them completely.

In that moment, Rishe made a stark realization. Different choices meant different mistakes. Opening one door would close another.

And so the easy path to a life in commerce was closed to her.

Sure, she could *try* to build her business from the ground up, but personal connections were almost as essential to being a merchant as business savvy. It just wasn’t realistic without a single acquaintance.

Sorting through her belongings in resignation, she came across a foreign encyclopedia of herbs among her grandmother’s books. Taking it as a sign, Rishe sold her jewels elsewhere and used the funds to cross the sea and pursue the study of medicine.

Fortunately, Rishe retained all her knowledge from her previous life. She remembered that certain expensive herbs could be acquired cheaply in other regions. When word spread of a disease running rampant in a neighboring country, she recalled that too. This foreknowledge proved invaluable, as did her wide travel and exposure to many different teachers with many different points of view.

As such, Rishe led a successful life as an apothecary. She saved a feeble prince, synthesized a number of rare medicines with her mercantile knowledge, and thus spent her days in the simple joy of helping those in need.

Unfortunately, all the joy in the world couldn’t stand up to an epidemic. Thus ended her second life.

Once again, she found herself in the moment of her broken engagement, the curtain rising on the third loop. Her next four lives proceeded much the same way. As a skilled lady’s maid, she helped a young noblewoman to a fortuitous marriage. Once, she even disguised herself as a man and became a knight. Every

life was worth living, and she enjoyed them all. She enjoyed living, period.

There was just one problem.

No matter what I do, I die at twenty.

She enjoyed her lives, but she was not permitted to do so for long. With this time limit always hanging over her, she spent each loop in a state of constant activity.

I would love to take it easy for a while. Is a little leisure time too much to ask? Obviously I don't want to die either! This time, I'll make as much money as I can in the first five years. Then, when I turn twenty, I'll live a life free of worldly cares. I'll do whatever's necessary to stay alive!

Her mind made up, Rishe began her seventh life in a dead sprint through the palace. Regardless of her future plans, she was in a race against time. She needed to beat the messenger bearing news of her scandal.

As she ran, she yanked off her hair ornaments; she planned to sell them and didn't want to risk losing one. Her hair billowed out behind her, falling in loose waves.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to her, one she hadn't had in any of her previous six lives.

Leaving through the palace gardens would be faster. I can climb down a tree from the balcony.

Rishe had gone to war as a knight in the life just before this one. After the punishing battlefield training, climbing trees was nothing.

Seamlessly, she changed direction. She raced for the balcony, where she ran into something at full speed.

"Bwargh!" Rishe let out a very unladylike grunt, staggering a few steps. She looked up to see what she'd bounced off of. "Oh..."

An exceptionally handsome man stood in her path.

He had refined, patrician features and cruel, thin lips. He was slender yet powerful; even through his clothes, Rishe could tell his body was well conditioned. His jet-black hair covered his ears, creeping down to the nape of

his neck. The tips of his locks bounced with his movements. They looked to be soft to the touch.

From head to toe, he was a pleasure to look at—but what held Rishe's attention were his eyes. They were long in shape and impossibly blue, but they possessed a blade-sharp intensity. His gaze was clear, beautiful, and cold as ice. His eyelashes cast shadows on his striking face. He was a work of art.

Currently, this work of art was staring her down with a look that could kill.

He laughed. "You barreled right into me. For a moment, I thought I'd been attacked by a wild boar."

It was an exceedingly rude thing to say to a stranger, but as luck would have it, this man was not a stranger. At least not to Rishe.

"What are you even doing here?" the man went on. "The party is in the—"

Rishe interrupted him with a wordless shout of dismay. The man drew back, reflexively reaching for his sword. He composed himself with visible difficulty. "Who are you? You look like any noblewoman, but your manner is..."

"Emperor Arnold Hein!"

The man's eyes widened. He didn't mistake her surging contempt. Rishe had crossed swords with this man. Recently. He was the one responsible for ending her sixth life.

He must be a guest at the banquet. It makes sense.

Arnold Hein was the scion of a military nation not far from Rishe's home country of Hermity, the one in which they now stood. Their kingdoms, so recently at war, had brokered an ostensible peace, and the two ruling families met from time to time. Crown Prince Dietrich's engagement party would be one such occasion. He'd gathered elites from far and wide to introduce to his beloved Mary.

The man eyed Rishe with rising curiosity. "You know me? This is my first time in Hermity."

Uh-oh. Rishe pasted on a smile as her mind spun in circles. This man was dangerous. She had to avoid entanglements with him at all costs. Five years

from now, Arnold Hein would invade Hermitry.

He was an extraordinarily skilled swordsman and, with a powerful military at his back, was destined to conquer kingdom after kingdom. He had done as much in her second, third, fourth, and fifth lives. In her sixth, Rishe had faced him in battle herself and died by his hand.

We never had a chance. That war was lost before it began.

Arnold's brilliance lay not in his swordplay but in his skill as a tactician. He set countries up for conquest and knocked them down, swallowing them one by one.

I know him, but he doesn't know me. We haven't met in this life. I need an excuse fast.

Rishe curtsied slowly. "My name is Rishe Irmgard Weitzner. We've never been introduced, but I've heard of you."

Arnold donned an amused smile. "You plant your weight like a trained swordswoman. Your center of gravity is perfect."

"You exaggerate," Rishe demurred. "That was simply a curtsy to an esteemed guest."

"I must have misheard, but I swear you called me 'emperor' just now."

Rishe froze.

"My father yet lives," Arnold said. "I am simply a crown prince. Why would you call me that?"

"Uh, um..." Rishe floundered for an answer.



She'd made such a foolish mistake. Arnold's gaze cut right through her. It felt like he'd see through any lie she told right down to her soul. She remembered this from the battlefield—how his attention alone felt like a sword thrust.

But why even bother to lie? They'd never meet again, so who cared what he thought of her? Sure, she harbored a hard feeling or two over the recent slaying, but there was no point complaining about it to *this* Arnold. Calling him the emperor was boorish, but Rishe was in the process of being forcibly exiled. Why play at diplomacy?

She took a deep breath and bowed low. This was not the curtsy of a noble lady but of a servant bowing in supplication to her master.

"My humblest apologies, Your Highness. I was in a rush. Such a rude slip of the tongue." She raised her head. "My ex-fiancé just annulled our engagement, so I've got a lot on my mind. If you would excuse me."

"He annulled your engagement?"

At that, Rishe turned and fled.

This unexpected run-in with Arnold had taken up valuable time. She threw open the door to the balcony and hiked up her skirts, kicking off her shoes in anticipation of jumping into a tree. Looking down, she realized the ground was far closer than she'd feared.

Excellent! I can just drop into the garden!

Arnold, who up until now had been rendered speechless, shook himself out of his fugue as Rishe clambered over the railing. "Hey!"

Rishe's moonlight-silver dress flowed around her as she leapt. The lawn was soft, but the fall was still far enough to risk injury.

Weight evenly distributed on the soles of my feet, roll to transfer the impact to my shins and thighs, then onto my hips and my back.

She landed safely, rolled nimbly in her dress, and popped back up. Her hair was covered in leaves.

I need to hurry up!

Bracing against a nearby rock, she used her weight to snap the heels off of her shoes. There. That would make running a little easier. Satisfied, she slipped them back on and made haste toward the family estate.

Up on the balcony, Crown Prince Arnold of Galkhein watched the spectacle play out from beginning to end. He gazed at the girl with the coral hair. Her appearance was that of any young noblewoman, but she moved like a well-trained knight. She'd leapt from the balcony and landed skillfully, showing no signs of distress at her ripped dress or disheveled hair. Instead, she'd knocked the heels off her shoes and dashed away.

Also, she had called him an emperor.

Playing it all over again in his head, Arnold broke out into a rare chuckle. As his shoulders quivered with laughter, his attendant approached him from behind.

"There you are, Your Highness. What are you doing out here? I'm aware you don't desire a wife, but beginning the search would be wise... Er, Your Highness?" The attendant's eyes flew wide. His bored and scowling master was *laughing*. "Did something happen?"

"Oliver, ready my coach. Wait, no. That will take too much time. Bring me a horse."

"At once, Your Highness. Might I ask why?"

Arnold didn't respond—he just grinned like a hungry wolf catching scent of his prey.

Once outside the palace gates, Rishe threw herself into the waiting coach, shouting for the driver to make haste. She stopped it a few hundred yards from the manor and bid him farewell. "I'm leaving! Thanks for always being such a safe driver, Daniel!"

The road to the manor was muddy from a morning rain shower. She knew from her second life that the coach would get stuck, resulting in a loss of

valuable time. It was better to just get out and run.

“Huff, huff.” Despite her last life’s physical conditioning, *this* body had no stamina. She’d need to try to get fitter faster this time around.

Rishe reached the end of the road, and her heart promptly sank all the way to her feet. “Oh no.”

The front door was thronged with people, all of them surrounding a carriage bearing the royal family’s coat of arms.

I need to get out of here.

While she stood frozen in indecision, one of the knights doing crowd control shouted, “Your Highness! I have eyes on Lady Rishe!”

“Get out of my way!” A familiar voice started up a bellow. “Let me through! Rishe, how *dare* you make me wait so long?”

Rishe’s ex-fiancé, Crown Prince Dietrich, stepped triumphantly forward.

“I know the thought of hearing your crimes enumerated by the man you love must pain you, but alas, as future king, it is my duty to bring down the hammer of justice upon a villainess such as yourself!”

“I see I’ve timed it badly,” Rishe muttered. “In fact, this is my worst loop yet. I’d rather be barred from the house than see you again.”

“Hmm? What are you grumbling about?” Dietrich looked Rishe up and down. “I knew it. You put on a brave face, but I can sense the sorrow in your heart.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your heart!” the prince repeated. “Your heart! It must be absolutely crushed! Because I called off our engagement!”

Rishe wasn’t sure where he was drawing these conclusions from. Possibly the same place he mined for all his bottomless self-confidence.

“I can tell you’ve been wandering aimlessly, distraught,” the prince went on. “Look at you. Your dress is caked in mud, your shoes are broken, and there are cuts marring your face and arms. What other possible cause could there be than heartbreak?”

Rishe narrowed her eyes. “Do you ever stop to think about the words coming out of your mouth?”

“What?”

His interpretation of events was fanciful to the point of absurdity. “I did not dirty my dress or snap my shoes out of heartbreak. Because I feel none. You’ve always been a little slow, so I’ll make this clear: I do not have a single shred of fondness for you, or for our broken engagement.”

“What?!” the prince said. “What are you saying?!”

The surrounding crowd began to snicker.

“Isn’t that the crown prince? Did Lady Rishe just dump him?”

“Wait, but wasn’t he trying to dump *her*?”

“Can’t be! Look at her! She doesn’t care at all!”

“How dare you nobodies make sport of me?” Dietrich screeched. “I am your prince!”

Temper aside, Dietrich was a handsome man. He had azure-blue eyes and blond hair—a prince straight out of a picture book. His looks and place in the succession meant a never-ending swarm of women vying for his affections. He was brought up a pampered princeling, never wanting for anything. It manifested in a pompous manner and an overconfidence in his own abilities. Rishe had cautioned him about his attitude before, but he never paid her any mind.

I’m so glad I don’t have to marry him.

She wished she could go back and tell the shocked, scared girl from her first life not to worry about her shattered engagement. Still, she might as well say it all here and now, with the assembled knights and citizens to bear witness.

“Your Highness, you exist to love and protect your people. It’s unbecoming to speak of them in this manner.”

“You’re the unbecoming one!” the prince snapped. “Beg me for forgiveness!”

“I won’t. Calling off our betrothal is the best course, and I applaud Your

Highness for your good sense.”

Now even the knights were trembling with suppressed mirth.

Dietrich was turning red. “D-don’t laugh at me!”

“Lady Rishe,” came a sweet voice. “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

Rishe fought down a groan.

Out of the crowd stepped a charming, dainty girl. Her big eyes moist with tears, she took her place at Dietrich’s side. “I do not allow the people I care about to be treated so very ill!”

“Why, Lady Mary. You’re here.” Rishe sighed. “How nice.”

The young Mary scowled through her tears. Hidden behind her skirts, Dietrich continued to shout his disapproval. “Rishe! You’ve brought my beloved Mary to tears! She’s told me everything. How you bullied her, ridiculed her. How you find it amusing to lock her in the classroom overnight! Such a wicked woman could never be queen!”

None of that’s true.

Rishe glanced at Mary, who averted her gaze a little awkwardly.

“More importantly,” Rishe said, “have you already brought your concerns to my parents, Your Highness?”

“*More importantly?! I did, if you must know! Your parents are furious. They have vowed to disown you.*”

“Ah. Then I’m too late.” Her parents held their reputation above all else. Rishe had little hope of retrieving any of her money or belongings now.

“Why are you acting so strangely?” Dietrich sniffed. “Ah, I understand. You’re in such shock from this turn of events that—”

“Listen, Dietrich.” In her exasperation, Rishe dropped his title. “I accept your decree. We are no longer engaged. I shall never darken your doorstep again. So...relax a little.”

“Huh? What are you saying?”

“Since I was a child, I believed that my only value was in our betrothal. Being

engaged to the crown prince was my whole reason for living. I was wrong about that. Only I determine my value—no one else. That's why I don't care about this. I'm beyond it." Rishe made sure to look him directly in the eye as she spoke. "You are an unnecessary element in my life."

Dietrich staggered back. His legs seemed to go out from under him, and he crumpled. At that, the knights finally let go of their composure, laughing along with the courtiers.

"St-stop!" the prince wailed. "You are my subjects. This...this shows such flagrant disrespect!"

"Dietrich, don't pay them any mind," Lady Mary said. "Lady Rishe, is this cruelty necessary?"

"Perhaps this is a blessing in disguise." Rishe's attention moved to Mary, making the girl's slender shoulders jump. She had no reason to worry; Rishe didn't bite. "I've been wanting the opportunity to speak to you, Lady Mary. You're strong. I admire you very much."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're a lovely girl who never fails to smile despite your troubles. You don't put up walls around your heart, and you do your utmost to put others at ease. Even now, you bravely stand before me to protect the prince."

Mary's eyes were wide with confusion. Rishe picked her words carefully, attempting to diminish the girl's guilty feelings, if only a little. "You need to marry the prince for your family's sake, right?"

"How do you—?"

Rishe had learned this truth in one of her past lives. Mary was born to a poor family, and she had studied like mad to be accepted into the academy to hunt for a husband. She intended to make sure neither she nor her brothers ever went hungry again.

She went on, "Remember this: you are the one in control of your life. Don't sell it to anyone else. Can you trust a man who so easily discards the woman he's been engaged to since childhood? Do you truly believe he cares for you?"

Astonishment bloomed across Mary's face. She looked over at Dietrich, who hadn't bothered to stand up. The truth was...within a year, Prince Dietrich would be in prison, his title stripped from him. He would plan a mad coup d'état against the king, attempting to provoke the citizens to war. His plan would be discovered in its early stages, rendering him a laughingstock across the kingdom.

"You must shape your future with your own hands—you mustn't entrust your desires to others."

"My...my desires?"

Rishe nodded.

Mary was looking at her like she was speaking a foreign language. "But I'm their elder sister." Her voice quivered. "I must endure, no matter what. Otherwise, my brothers will never be happy."

"And you believe their happiness can only be achieved by sacrificing your own?"

Mary gasped as she gaped at Rishe.

"You don't need to throw away your own future to protect those you love," Rishe told her. "No matter what path you choose, never forget that."

"My future?" Mary's voice went ragged, like she was barely suppressing a wail of pain.

"I wish you a life where both you and your family can be happy," said Rishe.

Mary stood frozen in place, eyes gleaming like precious stones. Rishe couldn't help but admire how pretty she was. She truly did wish her happiness. But right now, she needed to take care of herself.

"Well." Rishe suddenly broke into a smile, making Dietrich flinch. "I think it's time for me to be on my way."

She regretted losing access to her room, but she knew her parents wouldn't let her in. Turning her back on the crowd, Rishe contemplated her next move.

"Wait, Lady Rishe!" Mary's voice rang out.

“That’s right. You’re not going anywhere, Rishe!” The prince joined her. “You won’t get away with treating me like trash to relieve your own injured heart.”

“Ugh, enough already!” Rishe’s patience was fraying. “I don’t have anything else to say to you. Goodbye!”

“Knights, stop her!”

Reluctantly, the knights moved to tail Rishe as she walked briskly back down the path. She sympathized with them, but she wasn’t about to let them keep her here. Rounding a corner, she sensed something uncanny. She stopped, the knights quickly catching up with her.

“My apologies, Lady Rishe. If you could please remain for just a—whoa!”

Rishe grabbed the hilt of the knight’s sword. Yanking it from his belt, she spun around and stood at the ready. Metal rang against metal as Rishe parried a blow. She glared at her would-be attacker as he stepped out of the shadows.

Arnold Hein!

“Well, what do you know.” The man smiling so sweetly while their swords locked was the very man who had ended her life. “You *do* have some skill.”

Metal screeched and slid, before Arnold sheathed his sword. Rishe lowered hers. Neither looked away.

“Who the hell are you?” demanded one of the knights.

“Stand down, good sirs,” Rishe said. “Your interference will only make this worse.”

This mostly served to befuddle the knights further. Rishe absolutely couldn’t allow them to come to blows with the crown prince of a friendly nation. *And they couldn’t beat him—not even if they took him all at once.* Rishe had blocked his blow, but her arm was completely numb. To think he’d be even more powerful in five years.

He regarded her unabashedly. “Rishe, was that your name? Where did you learn such swordsmanship?”

“I’m afraid I cannot say. Besides, you were clearly going easy on me.”

“Ha! You could tell?”

Arnold’s manner was throwing her off. He seemed to be enjoying himself. *He’s laughing. This monstrous prince is...actually laughing.*

When she had met him in her other life, he was cold and merciless, like a genuine monster. And yet here he stood, mellow and smiling.

The Emperor Arnold Hein I knew was twenty-four years old, so he’s, what? Nineteen now? This is so weird. He’s grinning like a boy getting into a scrape.

That attack had been good-natured as well, almost playful. It had muscle behind it but certainly not any lethal intent. He’d just wanted to force Rishe to catch the blow. She found it unbelievable that he could exude such an overpowering air of menace when he was just messing around.

While Rishe was focused on Arnold, Mary and Dietrich caught up, seemingly recovered.

“Excuse me, my lord!” Mary squeaked. “I-I-I don’t know who you are, but kindly step away from Lady Rishe!”

“Yes, do as she says! Who the hell are you, anyway?!”

Don’t tell me Prince Dietrich doesn’t recognize one of his personal guests.

Dietrich’s interests did not lean toward diplomacy; he likely hadn’t bothered to introduce himself to Arnold. Mary, for her part, seemed to grasp that Arnold wasn’t ordinary. She stood up to defend Rishe, despite the tremble in her voice. In a better world, perhaps the two of them could have become friends.

“That’s your ex-fiancé?” Arnold cocked a brow. “He’s even worse than I imagined. Pathetic.”

Dietrich flushed. “I’ll have your head!”

“Dietrich, I beg of you, contain yourself,” Rishe said, then rounded on Arnold. “As for you, Your Highness—you know who Dietrich is, and you know what speaking carelessly could mean. Are you trying to pick a fight?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Arnold’s brows lifted high, making him the picture of innocence. “Believe me, Lady Rishe, every word I speak is chosen with *extreme* care.”

Finally realizing who Arnold was, Dietrich visibly paled. “Arnold? *He’s* the crown prince of Galkhein?”

Mary yelped. The knights stood down, shamefaced. The gossip-hungry neighbors who’d gathered to witness a scandal play out drew back in fear.

“He’s the demon prince? The one who single-handedly destroyed a whole order of enemy knights?”

“Watch your tongue, fool! Do you want him to do the same to you?”

The two nations enjoyed peaceful relations, but Arnold remained the dreaded prince, heir to the throne of a former enemy. Current rumor wasn’t as widespread as it would be in five years, but he was still regarded with distrust.

The onlookers stood rooted to the spot, too terrified to flee.

Well, this has devolved into a full-fledged disaster.

Rishe heaved a frustrated sigh. “Prince Arnold, to what do we owe this honor? Surely a crown prince would not draw his sword for a mere jest.”

“I’m here on business,” Arnold said. “But first, I must beg forgiveness for my rudeness.”

Huh, what do you know? Once he became emperor, he’d gladly behead any subject who so much as dared speak a word against him.

I guess at nineteen he still knew how to apologize.

If that surprised her, Arnold’s next act completely obliterated her sense of reality.

With a flourish, he fell to his knees.

“Huh?” *Is this actually happening?*

He was a man destined for an imperial crown. A man who would stand at the head of a military powerhouse and spread his rule across continents.

Arnold, known for his frigid pride, knelt to the disgraced daughter of a duke.

And not only that—his head was bowed, looking nothing so much as a knight swearing allegiance to his lady. If it were anyone else, it would be a delightful, pious image. Instead, the assembled looked on in terrified awe.

Not Rishe, though.

“What are you doing?” she hissed. “Get up!”

“I’m apologizing for my baseless impertinence. Also, I’m asking you...” He trailed off to take Rishe’s hand, tugging her forward so forcefully she staggered. He gazed up at her.

Ugh. He’s so beautiful. No matter how many times she looked at him, it didn’t become any less disarming. Long eyelashes, arched brows, a noble nose. His bright blue eyes reminded her of the drift ice she’d seen in a northern kingdom, gazing out from a ship in one of her past lives. She knew she was dwelling on this to buy time, even as the reality before her sank in.

“...to become my wife.”

She froze, unable to process the words. “What?” Rishe glanced around, desperately searching the faces of the crowd. They all seemed as stunned as she felt. She looked down at Arnold again. “Your wife?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“You want *me* to become *your* wife?”

“Yes.”

Rishe couldn’t speak. This was truly happening. It was real. It clicked into place in her head, and she let out a strangled grunt.

What is going on? Why is this happening?

Shock lapped at her, fuzzing at the corners of her vision. He wanted to marry her. Arnold wanted to marry Rishe. Her *murderer* wanted to marry her.

Why is he doing this? He must have some ulterior motive, a broader goal. But I have to give him an answer.

The onlookers were holding their breath as Rishe said flatly, “I reject your proposal.”

Arnold said nothing.

She had to reject him. She was going to live a long, peaceful, carefree life, damn it, and no one would stop her. And yet...

Arnold began to laugh, and the deep, creeping sense of dread inside Rishe only grew. *Why does he seem so amused by this?!*

Her previous life was her sixth. Disguised as a man, Rishe rose as a warrior of an island country she came upon in her travels. It was a conventional yet charming kingdom formed of red brick. After striking up a friendship with a group of knights who didn't realize she was a woman, Rishe followed their advice and joined them.

The training was grueling enough to make her wish she were dead. Back when she had lived as a noble, she'd learned how to wield a sword for basic self-defense, but training as a noble lady had in no way prepared her for *this*. She drilled relentlessly, barely taking the time to sleep. Just as she became a full-fledged knight, Emperor Arnold's forces lay siege to the castle.

How could this happen?

In her seventh life, Rishe wearily sank into her chair. Across from her sat Arnold, his legs crossed and chin propped up on his hand, watching her lazily.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You seem unhappy."

"You could say that." Even her voice was grumpy. Still, she couldn't very well tell him it was because she bore a grudge from a previous life. After the first time her life rewound to that pivotal moment, she'd resolved to keep her loops a secret. "I had plans for my exile. A brand-new life. And now because of you, my parents are involved. Even the king has heard about it!"

After Rishe rejected Arnold, Dietrich had immediately cried out, "Th-the crown prince of Galkhein proposed to *Rishe?!!*"

His shrieks were loud enough to attract the attention of the master and mistress of the manor.

When her parents came out, Rishe had protested, "I'm not going to marry him! I'm leaving the country just as Dietrich commanded."

No one listened. Their faces just paled with nervous confusion.

Just then, a glittering coach arrived. Half-stuck in the mud, the man inside it was forced to trudge over the swampy ground, and so the king of Hermitry himself arrived, staggering and dirt-stained.

He grabbed hold of his son's collar, pushing him into a low bow. He then turned to Prince Arnold and said, rather loudly, "Your Highness! Allow me to apologize for my son's foolishness! You are an esteemed guest all the way from Galkhein! It is unthinkable he would not offer you the courtesy you are due!"

"You're hurting me, Father! My back!"

The king then turned to Rishe. "My lady, allow me to sincerely apologize as both a king and a father. My son's behavior toward you has been utterly disgraceful. I beg you to please give Prince Arnold's proposal due consideration. Not only for your own sake but for the sake of your country."

The king bowed to her as deeply as his son had to Arnold, and her parents joined him. Rishe felt dizzy at the sight of this abject debasement in the presence of citizens.

Arnold, who had been watching the proceedings with a detached amusement, sobered and stepped toward the king. "Your Majesty, please rise."

Without the smirk, Arnold's face immediately reverted to its cold mask. The king didn't move. Maybe something in Arnold's voice kept him frozen.

"Such a trifle won't cause discord between our kingdoms," he went on. "However, I would beg a little time to speak with Lady Rishe."

Later, Rishe would learn that Arnold's attendant had spoken to the king's own gentleman, certain that his words would reach their target. "My master took such trouble to attend these festivities, and this is the welcome he is offered? I wonder, what will the emperor think when he learns of his son's slighting at your nation's hands?"

"If you would, Lady Rishe?" The plump king looked to be on the verge of tears.

Rishe had no obligation to accept and no desire to spend a moment longer in this country than was absolutely necessary. But acquiescence seemed the fastest way to move things along.

As her mind whirled, Arnold leaned in to whisper, “If you refuse to hear my suit, you won’t deter me. I’ll simply move on to Plan B.”

And that was how she found herself in one of the palace’s parlors, here to “just talk” to Prince Arnold. The ball guests were all gone. It was just the two of them.

“I want to know what you’re planning,” Rishe said flatly.

“Planning? Me?”

“By asking me to marry you. You don’t know me. A proposal like this wouldn’t come out of the blue.”

This man was destined to become an aggressive warmonger over the next few years. He wouldn’t do anything without a dozen motives.

Prince Arnold just smiled. “I have no plans. I’m simply enamored with you.”

“Enamored...?”

That was the last thing she’d expected him to say. Asking him to elaborate didn’t seem worth the breath—he was obviously lying. As if this ruthless, inhuman creature with ice in his veins could feel even a flicker of affection.

“Why refuse me?” Arnold asked. “Your engagement is broken, you’re on the verge of exile, and you have no faction or supporters. At this rate, you’ll be dead within a fortnight. I’d call my offer a stroke of unbelievable fortune.”

“You’re not wrong,” Rishe admitted. “Once upon a time, I would have jumped at your offer.”

If it had been made in her first life, for instance. But now Rishe knew better. Her life was only just getting started, and the future held endless possibilities. After the horror of her sixth loop, she yearned for freedom.

I don’t want to marry him. I won’t be anyone’s captive. Still...

Rishe, more than anyone, knew that the slightest adjustment could enact profound changes on the trajectory of a life. No doubt she’d have many more lives, but this could be the only one where marriage to Arnold would be an option.

The dread emperor. The tyrant. The man who will stoke the fires of war.

Rishe knew the gossip, the endless conjecture behind Arnold Hein's bloody reign, but she didn't know the truth.

Why? The question had haunted her since her first life. She'd never before had the chance to even speak to him.

She had wondered it as a merchant, hearing of the distant outbreak of war. She'd wondered when the news of the dead and dying reached her apothecary. When she had comforted her terrified mistress in her life as a maid, assuring her everything would be all right. When she squared off against him in battle, as he plunged a sword through her heart—even then she wondered.

If I stick around, maybe I'll finally have my answer. Half of her was dying to know. The other half didn't give a damn. *And yet...*

She recalled a childhood dream. Rather, a longing.

Rishe let out a breath. "You claim you are enamored with me."

"Yes. I am completely under your spell."

To think he could spout such nonsense with a straight face!

"Then will you grant me anything I desire?"

"So long as it is within my power," Arnold said. "Anything you want will be yours."

Rishe hesitated, gathering her thoughts. "I have some conditions." Arnold silently motioned for her to go on. "I want full control over the wedding festivities. Everything must be procured through merchants of my choosing."

"Fine." Arnold nodded. "You're free to do business with whomever you wish."

"After we are married, I must be in a position to mingle with guests from abroad."

"That sounds within the purview of the crown princess. Anything else?"

"I will be allowed to live in a separate residence from your mother and father."

She meant this seriously, but it made Arnold laugh. "You don't seem the type

to worry about an overbearing mother-in-law.”

“You would be surprised. Combative relationships with one’s new family are the most difficult part of marriage, or so they say. It could be a ramshackle cottage for all I care—I just require a secondary residence.”

Actually, Rishe didn’t care at all about in-laws. When Arnold set his war into motion, his first move would be the assassination of his father. A genuine coup by patricide, not at all like Dietrich’s clumsy attempt. Next, he would name himself emperor, take control of the country, and mobilize the military.

Separating him from his parents will make the first step more difficult—although not impossible, unfortunately.

“Anything else?” Arnold asked. “I’ll do whatever it takes to marry you.”

“Ideally, I’d like to know your endgame,” Rishe said with dignity. “But as I doubt there’s any chance of that, I have one final request.” She jabbed a finger into his face, regardless of how rude it was. “I will spend my time idling around the castle. No work, no study. I shall be utterly useless.”

Let’s see just how much you want me as your princess.

After a long moment of silence, Arnold cracked a merry laugh. The proposal remained; all her conditions were met.

Chapter 2

“YOU KNOW, it was only after I went into commerce that I truly had a dream for the future,” Rishe had once confided in a friend. “Up until then, I existed only as the crown prince’s fiancée or my father’s daughter. My every act was to become more worthy of that status. But now, for the first time, I actually have a goal of my own.”

“Oh, yeah?” her friend said. He was the ruler of the desert kingdom, and his smile was awfully charming. “What’s that?”

Rishe smiled back. “I want to travel to every single country in the world. I want to see everything in every town, peruse their markets, and meet the eyes of every person who lives there!”

By now, that felt like such a distant dream.

Rishe awoke with a start, eyes snapping open as she sensed a disturbance in the air.

She unsheathed her sword halfway, primed for danger.

Inside the coach, her old enemy sat across from her, one hand outstretched. “What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

When they’d boarded the coach, Rishe had warned him not to lay a single finger on her throughout the trip to his kingdom. Ordering the prince not to touch his consort was absurd, but Arnold readily agreed. He had, after all, promised to follow her every direction.

And yet, here he was, already breaking his promise.

Arnold appeared unperturbed by her glare. “Don’t look at me like that. I was merely trying to recover what you took from me.”

Confused, Rishe looked at the sword in her hand. It had a black lacquered scabbard with a simple golden decoration. Engraved on the hilt was the Galkhein crest.

“Oh!” Rische thrust the sword back at Arnold. “My apologies.”

Arnold chuckled. “You caught me off guard. You were nodding off, and then you suddenly snatched up my sword. You looked quite content snuggling up with it.”

Arnold propped the sword beside him. Rische pressed a hand to her chest to quell her racing heart. *The sword that gutted me in my previous life is now my bedmate. What a world.* Her recent stint as a knight had left her ill at ease without a blade at hand. She just couldn’t believe it was *Arnold’s* she’d reached for.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you, but I doubted sleeping with a weapon would be comfortable. I’m impressed you sensed my intent before I even touched you.” Arnold rested one elbow against the window frame, watching her with shameless fascination. “One only develops instincts like that from combat training. And you were also a member of the court? How in the world did you find the time?”

Rische shrugged. She couldn’t just say, *I pretended to be a man in a previous life, that’s how.*

“I assume there’s more to you than your devotion to the sword. You seem to like flowers.”

She followed Arnold’s gaze to where she’d bundled a small bouquet in a handkerchief. This was their fifth day on the road to Galkhein. Every day, without fail, she’d picked flowers whenever they stopped to water the horses. The ones from today were still fresh, but the ones she’d begun drying five days ago were just about ready.

“I didn’t pick these because they’re pretty.” Rische brought the blooms to her face, spirits rising at their sweet scent. Spring wildflowers had a soft and gentle smell. Rische looked out the window at the forest spreading toward Galkhein, thinking of the rare native flowers going into bloom. She wished she could pick those as well, but that would cause too much delay. She gazed on wistfully.

After watching her in silence for some time, Arnold said, “By the way, I sent one of my men ahead on a fast horse to deliver your order to the company you requested. They’ll be invited to Galkhein to discuss the wedding ceremony.”

“Thank you,” Rishe said. “I’m glad you kept your word.”

“The Aria Trading Company,” Arnold mused. “I’ve heard of them. They’re up-and-comers, aren’t they? Have you done business with them before?”

“No, but I heard from a friend that they hold a very high standard of quality.”

Rishe was pleasantly surprised at how easily Arnold had acceded to her request. Typically, a royal household had their own personal dealer. Getting them to do business with someone else could be difficult.

I want to establish a connection with Aria as soon as possible, Rishe thought. It was, of course, the company that had taken her in during her first life.

The company had been established just two years prior to picking her up by its owner, a man named Tully. They were still in their growth stage, but in just a few years, they would be the grandest trading company in all the world. They’d proven a great boon in her life as an apothecary as well, helping to distribute her newest medicines. She’d struggled to win their trust initially, but she pledged to work much harder this time around.

This marriage isn’t going to happen—I need an escape plan for when it all falls apart. I must bring to bear all my knowledge and influence as a crown princess.

Rishe didn’t know Arnold’s plans, but she had no intention of sitting around and waiting for him to use her as he pleased. She’d spend her time as his consort wisely. Everything must serve her ultimate goal: to live longer than five years, and live well.

Her fierce determination must have shown on her face because Arnold gave her a little bemused smile. “Yes?”

God! Rishe grimaced at that flawlessly handsome countenance. Such beauty, possessed by such powerful destruction. The fact that he’d been the man to kill her did nothing to lessen her fascination. In fact, it almost made it worse. The study of contrasts.

“Sorry, I just—”

She was interrupted by the horses’ loud whinnies.

“Stop! Hey, stop the coach!”

Shouts drifted back from conveyance ahead of theirs, which contained the luggage and attendants. The squadron of knights tailing the column of coaches sped off toward the front.

“Who do you think you—graaargh!”

That didn’t sound good. Rishe moved to climb out, but Arnold was faster. He drew his sword.

“Hey!”

Arnold locked the door from the outside. “Stay hidden.”

Why is he putting himself in danger? That’s what knights are for! The fact that Rishe had been about to do the same thing didn’t occur to her. *It’s probably bandits. He told me to stay hidden in here, but I’m not so sure about that.*

Arnold had left her locked in from the outside, hoping to keep her safe, but Rishe didn’t like her odds. There were five coaches, but this one was certainly the grandest. It locked on the inside as well, but that wouldn’t stop someone with enough determination. If she did as she was told, she’d just be waiting patiently for a bandit to break a window and drag her out.

Keeping one eye on the coachmen fleeing into the forest, Rishe began a methodical search for something to help her. Right—her hairpin!

This sure brings me back. She unfastened it, twisting it into the gap in the door. *Back when I was a maid, my lady would lock herself in her chambers all the time to avoid her studies. I had to break her out just like this.*

The lock on the coach was simple, and it came open easily. Once she was free, she scanned her surroundings. She didn’t see anyone who looked immediately hostile, but there was noise up ahead. Cautiously, she headed toward it.

Before long, she found Arnold.

Wow.

Roughly ten men—the bandits, she presumed—lay crumpled on the ground. In their midst stood Arnold, in the process of tripping another man into the dirt. He scowled, blade at the man’s throat. “Is that it, then?”

“Gwugh!”

Arnold kicked the bandit in the stomach, eyes blazing with cruelty. “That’s all the thrill you offer me after I went to the trouble of drawing my sword? Barely worth it. I’m bored already.”

He wasn’t angry; on the contrary, he stared his enemies down with chilly disappointment, as if this had all been a letdown. Even Arnold’s own knights seemed terrified of their master when he was in a mood. Arnold smoothly flicked the blood off his sword, wiping the blade on the bandit’s shirt before sheathing it. The rest of the men on the ground seemed to be unconscious.

Wait, he didn’t kill anyone? Why not? Is it because we haven’t reached Galkhein?

She supposed even Arnold knew better than to go around killing the citizens of other countries. Or perhaps he had yet to become the ruthless monster she knew him as.

Arnold seemed to sense her gaze, turning around with a start. Genuine emotion bloomed on his face, worlds away from the blank mask he wore to face down the bandits. “How did you get out of the coach?”

Rishe shrugged. “If I tell you, you’ll be able to prevent me from doing it again.”

Arnold snickered. “You continue to amaze me.”

How can you go from ice-cold to suddenly looking like a normal nineteen-year-old? It’s disconcerting.

Rishe fought down her disquiet as a man alighted from a coach and shouted, “Your Highness! Not again!” He was Oliver, one of the prince’s attendants. He had silver hair and was roughly as tall as Arnold.

“What do you think all these knights are for, decoration? Why do you insist on endangering yourself?”

Rishe had only met Oliver briefly a few days ago, but he didn’t appear to be intimidated by Arnold at all. *And, well...he’s not wrong.*

She feared the menace would return to Arnold’s expression, but he just looked annoyed. “I could tell they were prepared to kill. I’d prefer to take the

burden on myself than risk multiple injuries so far afield. And we already have casualties.”

He was right. Several injured knights leaned listlessly among the trees. Arnold issued orders to those still able-bodied. “First squad, see to the wounded. Second squad, arrest these men.”

“Yes, sir!”

Oliver appeared unsatisfied. “Your Highness, that is a weak justification. I’m overjoyed you’re well, but you must consider Lady Rishe. Perhaps next time we run into a team of murderous brigands, you could allow your consort to remain in the coach.”

“I *told* her to remain in the coach!”

Rishe quickly averted her gaze, turning her attention to the wounded knights. They didn’t appear badly injured, yet they all seemed exhausted.

“Excuse me, can I take a look?” Rishe approached the knight acting as a medic. He looked round, startled by her presence.

“Nonsense, my lady. Don’t trouble yourself, you must have had quite a scare.”

This was not unreasonable, but the wariness in his eyes made it clear he wanted her nowhere near his comrade. *He isn’t just being polite. He truly is on guard.*

Beside them, an injured knight groaned as another helped him up. “What’s wrong with you?” the second knight asked the first.

“I-I feel...numb.”

“What? Damn.” The knight grabbed up one of the fallen bandit’s swords, going pale as he inspected the blade. “Your Highness, look at this. Poison.”

Arnold clicked his tongue. “Locate every laceration and bind them close to the heart. Suck the poison from the wounds.”

He mostly got that right, at least. In the meantime, Rishe located the nearest bound bandit and pulled his dagger out of its sheath. Its wet coating gleamed in the sunlight, just as the knight had said.

They applied the poison liberally—whatever it is must be cheap and easily bought in bulk.

She wafted the smell toward her, bracing for something rancid, but detected nothing. Then she brought it closer to her nose.

It smells sweet, like an overripe apple. Shea grass and...bluecap mushrooms. All the knights appear to have the same symptoms, so I won't have to check every blade.

Rishe stood back up and headed for the coach.

Oliver took a step after her. “Your Highness, Lady Rishe is—”

“Leave her. She may do as she pleases.”

“She’s well trained,” Oliver mused. “But a battlefield is no place for a young lady. She probably wasn’t prepared for such a dreadful spectacle.”

Rishe ignored the murmurs and focused on her work. *There they are. I'll take these, these, and...*

“The poison must be a sleeping drug,” she overheard Arnold saying. “Hunters use such drugs to weaken larger prey. I doubt this dose is lethal.”

“But it certainly is annoying,” replied Oliver. “We’re still two days out from Galkhein. Lugging a company of sleeping men in armor won’t be pleasant.”

“We’ll have to stop somewhere nearby. A hunter’s settlement. Perhaps they will have an antidote—”

“Excuse me.” Rishe, who’d returned from the carriage, raised a hand. “I have an antidote.”

“What?”

The entire company stared at her in awe.

As it turned out, Arnold’s guess was right.

This sweet-smelling substance *was* a hunter’s drug, made from ingredients that were only toxic in their raw form. Heat rendered them harmless. Rishe had encountered this poison several times before, curing a customer afflicted with it

during her life as an apothecary.

“A lethal dose for a grown man would fill a wine glass. They likely got less than a hundredth of that,” Rishe explained to Arnold, not looking up from her work. “Still, the numbness can block their airways with the roots of their tongues. It’s best to lay them on their sides.”

“Yes, I understand the theory and the solution.” Arnold gazed down at Rishe’s hands. “The part I’m struggling with is why you’re the one telling me this.”

“Well, I know how to make the antidote,” Rishe said patiently as she muddled the herbs together in the white soup bowl she’d borrowed for her flowers. She crushed them with the back of a spoon before adding another dried flower, crushing that as well, and combining them to form a paste. This process would be easier with a pestle, but she wasn’t about to complain. “This poison is common—it’s cheap and easy to make, which often means the antidote is simple as well.”

The antidote was synthesized, in fact, when hunters witnessed a deer showing no symptoms after eating a certain mushroom. They tested those along with other common herbs the deer ate. Rishe mentally thanked them for their scientific rigor as she added a bit of water, straining it all through a cloth.

Rishe stood up, brandishing the bowl of bright green medicine. “Boiling would make the antidote more potent, but this works in a pinch.”

That was when she noticed the astonished stares. Unsure of what social faux pas she’d perpetrated, she looked away. Oliver was completely stunned. Arnold looked thoughtful. It was imperative the knights were treated as soon as possible, but to Rishe’s dismay, no one was moving.

Do they not trust me? That makes sense. Anyone would be reluctant to use medicine concocted by a complete stranger. But the longer we wait, the harder the poison will become to cure.

She needed to dispel their doubts. Rolling up her sleeve, Rishe approached Arnold and drew his sword from its scabbard. “I need to borrow this for a moment, Your Highness.”

“What are you—”

She pushed the blade against the soft skin of her inner arm. Blood welled up, along with the sharp sting of pain. Nothing compared to her injuries sustained during her life as a knight, though.

Arnold did not share her nonchalance. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

He grabbed for her arm. She stepped out of his grasp. Was blood truly so shocking? She didn’t have the time to worry about it. Clutching the overfull bowl, Rishe hurried back to the knights.

“Don’t worry. This isn’t poison,” Rishe said. She demonstrated as much by drizzling it with a spoon over her own fresh wound. It stung. That meant the ingredients were working.

“This is crushed liquori grass, luqua flowers, and carilya nuts. I’ll swallow some if that’s what it takes to prove it’s safe.” It was horribly bitter; she hoped it wouldn’t come to that. “The paralysis will last for days. Please make up your mind quickly.”

“Make up our mind?”

“Will you allow me to cure the poison? Or would you rather drag paralyzed soldiers all the way to Galkhein? I suppose you could waste His Highness’s time searching for a hunter’s settlement to use *their* antidote.” She smiled serenely. “It makes no difference to us. Right, Your Highness?”

In the end, Rishe applied the antidote.

The recovery took a few hours. While they waited, Rishe picked herbs in the same meadow she’d been gazing at with yearning from the carriage. A fortuitous turn of events. She found anti-inflammatory herbs and flowers to ease sour bellies, ingredients for curing headaches, and mushrooms for inducing slumber. She wrapped them all up in a handkerchief.

In the meantime, Arnold dispatched a messenger to this region’s lord, making arrangements to deliver the apprehended bandits. After coordinating with Oliver, he drifted over to Rishe.

“I see your interest in flowers is mercenary, rather than ornamental,” he said, surveying the heaps of herbs gathered on the bank of the pond. He sat down beside her.

When he didn't say anything more, Rishe went back to work plucking leaves from plants with valuable stems. The leaves had no medicinal effects, but they did make a decent broth. Slumber mushroom spores were a nuisance unless dried; they were spread out beside her in the sun.

I wonder, would he be annoyed if I attached herbs to the roof of the coach? That would be unusual adornment for a crown prince's retinue, but it wouldn't hurt to ask.

She realized, quite suddenly, that Arnold was looking at her. At her hands, specifically. He sat cross-legged with his chin propped on his fist, staring absently, like a kid watching a column of ants march by.

What is so fascinating about herbs?

Their eyes met. "Am I bothering you?" he asked.

Rishe shook her head slowly. "Not at all. I was just curious what caught your eye."

"Nothing specific. I was just thinking how very unusual you are." He was smiling again. "I'm looking forward to how you'll surprise me next."

Like I'm some sort of rare pet he bought to entertain him. She didn't like that. Nothing she'd done was at all remarkable—normal tasks performed by a normal person.

"I didn't make that antidote for your amusement."

"I realize that." The instigating smile faded from his lips. "You know, those knights you coerced into taking your home-brewed medicine were all born in the slums."

"Coerced? That's hardly the word I'd use."

"Galkhein claims to value merit above all else, but in the end, people are judged by where they came from. Despite this, those men fought their way up from nothing."

Rishe paused in plucking the seeds from a flower and looked up at Arnold.

"The men with the worst cases of the paralysis were all newly assigned. They've spent weeks training to ensure this mission was a success. That older

knight—the one who bowed to you—sustained an injury protecting the rookies. He cares deeply about his men.”

“You seem to care about them too,” Rishe commented.

“I handpicked them for my retinue.” Arnold clambered to his feet, only to fall into a bow. “And you kept them safe. You have my deepest gratitude.”

Rishe found herself at a loss for words. Was this Arnold putting on a mask to hide the monster within? Or was this the real him? She remembered the way he’d looked when he held his blade to the bandit’s throat, like a child poised to break a toy he had grown bored of.

“Don’t mention it,” Rishe said, uncomfortable. “I knew how to do it, so I did.”

Arnold laughed softly. “Be that as it may, I’d still count a noblewoman who can brew remedies from wildflowers by the side of the road a rare find.”

“Earlier, when you grabbed my wrist...” Rishe steered the subject away from her incongruous knowledge. “You broke your promise. You said you wouldn’t touch me.”

“That was reflex,” Arnold protested. “I thought you were going to hurt yourself.”

Such a simple conversation, so casual. It had Rishe feeling positively peculiar.

“Why are your knights so wary around me?” she asked.

“Wary? Oh, they were all at the palace when you broke your first engagement. They’re most likely concerned I’m bringing home a villainous jilt who will lead to my ruin. Something silly like that.”

“I see.” Apparently, being dumped by a prince called into question one’s herbalist abilities.

“I’m glad you mentioned it,” Arnold went on, “because there may be people in Galkhein who will oppose our union. I will do everything in my power to protect you, but you must bring any insults or threats to me right away.”

“Are there likely to be many?”

“In theory, the crown prince may choose his own wife, but the done thing is,

of course, to marry a princess. I assume a duke's daughter would have at least *some* ties to the royal family?"

He assumed correctly. She was in the family tree, if a rather distant branch.

"My father has ordered me to choose a bride from a different kingdom rather than a woman of my own land because—"

"One never knows when a hostage will come in handy," Rische finished for him.

Galkhein was an expansionist empire. Currently, peace reigned—but peace was precarious. If Galkhein demanded any of the countries to hand over a princess bride, then none were in a position to refuse. With his daughter in the hands of a foreign power, no king would dare oppose a war that power cared to wage.

"I sent a message to my father telling him I happened upon a close relation of Hermit's king—a duke's daughter who had been recently tossed aside by her fiancée," Arnold said. "I also may have implied I was the reason for your falling out—yours and the prince's. Why, when I saw a woman so powerful and connected and beloved, I couldn't help but plunder you."

"*Plunder* me? That's certainly one way to describe it." Dietrich *had* kicked up an almighty fuss, despite being the one who broke the engagement.

"My father approves of you because he sees you as a bargaining chip. There will be others who aren't prepared to accept you so willingly."

"Is that so?" Rische said steadily.

"Never fear," Arnold responded. "They'll eat their words, every one of them. They will receive you as their crown princess if they value their—"

"No, being a hostage is perfect."

Arnold stared at her. "Hm?"

"As a hostage, I'll have no official duties, will I? We can pretend I'm here only under great duress, and there will be no need for my comment on governmental or diplomatic affairs."

Arnold hesitated. "I suppose not."

“Excellent! Then I can live my dream of being utterly useless.” Rishe trembled with delight. The thought of acting as an ambassador had really been weighing on her mind. Being a princess was nonstop work. Having been groomed for the position from an early age, Rishe knew members of the royal family barely even had time to sleep.

But prisoners didn’t have places in government.

“This is such a weight off my mind,” Rishe admitted. “Thank you so much for keeping your promise, Your Highness.”

“Er, of course.”

“But don’t worry, I won’t shirk my duties as wedding planner.” Nearly ready to collapse with relief, Rishe returned to her herbs.

After the bandit incident, Rishe felt the knights begin to ease a bit in her presence.

Despite their initial reluctance to accept her help, they continued to report the injured men’s progress and bring any concerns directly to her. In return, they took over gathering herbs from the surrounding countryside on their rest stops.

She hadn’t done it for gratitude, but she was nonetheless touched. Gathering medicinal herbs had been second nature ever since her life as an apothecary, and it was foolish to ever turn down loyalty.

Several days after the altercation with the bandits, the coach train finally arrived in the imperial capital of Galkhein.

“Oh my,” Rishe murmured as they passed through the gates.

White stone buildings stood in straight rows, lining clean, orderly streets. The first stories all appeared to be shops, while the second-floor windows were festooned with flowers. Everywhere she looked were smiling faces, citizens turned out to witness their prince’s return over the smooth brick roads. Overlooking it all was the towering magnificence of the imperial palace.

“The capital is the seat of power in Galkhein,” Arnold explained. “Several key

trade routes converge here.”

Rishe nodded, suddenly anxious to be out of the coach. More and more people were gathering to watch their progress, some carrying shopping bags in both arms or holding hands with children. Many of them waved, as if greeting someone dear to them.

Happy citizens and clean, orderly streets meant wealth. Galkhein was well-off. Rishe couldn't help but grin at an adorable little girl watching them roll by with sparkling eyes. When she saw Rishe's smile, she blushed and leapt up in the air, laughing with delight.

The coach made its way through the city before passing through the castle gates. Lines of disciplined knights flanked the road, ready to greet the crown prince and his fiancée.

Arnold stepped out of the coach, holding out his hand to Rishe. She took it reflexively as she alighted. A prince would be expected to help *any* lady out of carriage, never mind his own consort, yet for some reason the knights looked a bit disturbed.

Rishe shot them back of look of innocent confusion.

“Our long journey is at last at its end, Your Highness, Lady Rishe.” Oliver emerged from the ranks of the knights, bowing. He shot Arnold a curious glance. “How novel to see you taking the hand of your fiancée.”

Ah! Rishe realized that she herself had willingly broken the condition that she had imposed. Arnold had offered his hand, but she was the one who accepted.

Arnold gave a little laugh of triumph. Rishe felt a rush of frustration at being tricked.

Oliver stared at them before leaning in to whisper in Arnold's ear. Arnold let out a breath of annoyance.

“Is something the matter?” Rishe asked.

“I sent orders ahead to have a detached wing of the palace prepared for us, but it seems the preparations are behind schedule. I'm sorry, but you'll need to stay in a guest room in the main palace for a few days.”

“Oh, I don’t mind if the wing isn’t ready,” Rishe said. “We can head over there now.”

“It hasn’t been used in quite a while. It’ll be covered in dust.”

“I said that I didn’t mind if it was a mess, remember? But there’s no need for *you* to put yourself out. By all means, stay in the main palace for as long as you need.” Rishe had spent a life as a maid—dust didn’t scare her. “Besides, I’m a hostage, after all.”

“You could at least *attempt* to sound distressed,” Arnold said with the slightest trace of petulance.

Rishe, who had a huge grin spreading over her face and her chest puffed out with pride, didn’t respond.

The detached wing turned out to be just a separate palace in the distant corner of the grounds—a scant four stories tall and, as advertised, absolutely swimming in dust.

Not so bad, though. Rishe had pictured decay and clutter, but it was mostly just bare. Bare and musty, but not rotten or falling apart.

“You can do whatever you want with this place. I’ll be occupied over the next few days, but feel free to use the guest apartments in the main palace if you get tired of choking to death,” Arnold said before he left.

According to Oliver, work had piled up while the prince was away, and it wasn’t just a few things that could be dispensed with over a few days working around the clock.

Emperor Arnold Hein... He’s just a crown prince right now, but I still wish I knew what’s going on in his head. For now, I’ll just focus on what I can do. Like make this place livable.

She changed into her plainest dress and rolled up her sleeves. The knights who’d remained to serve as her guard kept watch over her as she went from window to window, throwing them all open.

In a stroke of luck, the weather was good, and the detached wing was well

placed to soak up the sun. The lack of any creature comforts made it look ascetic and drab, but once it was furnished, Rishe had no doubt it would be lovely.

Leaving the top floors to air out, Rishe found the stairs to the basement. She pushed the heavy wooden doors open, and mice skittered over her feet. The knights yelped as Rishe descended into the darkness.

“L-Lady Rishe, why are you going down here?”

“Cleaning supplies are usually kept in the basement. See?”

The knights followed her gaze to a duster, broom, dustpan, and pile of fresh cloths. She filled a bucket with water and went to work, rolling up a handkerchief to cover her mouth as she swept dust down from high on the walls. Then she swept up all the dust on the floor.

It's always satisfying to tackle a place this filthy.

She corralled the dust bunnies until they were piled up like snow in the center of the hall, and then she swept them out the open door. Once the floors were free of debris, she attacked them with the cloth.

“Lady Rishe, is there anything we can do to help?”

Rishe was grateful for the knight's offer, but she shook her head. “Your job is to guard me, not do my housekeeping.”

“This is quite the place to clean on your own, detached though it may be,” the knight said hesitantly. “It's not too late to move into the guest chambers instead.”

“That's all right. I like the place already.”

Rishe remained steadfast in her refusal for one reason: readying guest chambers was an awful chore. The palace maids would be expected to work overnight to prepare them, even if the guests were only staying a single night. No speck of dust or strand of hair could remain. Certainly no wrinkled sheets. Rishe knew how exhausting and rigorous a maid's job was, how nerve-racking.

She refused to put the poor dears through such an ordeal for just a few days' stay. From the sound of things, the palace wasn't equipped with many

housemaids. No doubt they already had their hands full.

“Besides, take a look.” She held out her arms wide, gesturing to her sparkling clean floor. The knights stared at the bright room in admiration. “Cleaning a place with your own hands makes living there that much more satisfying, you see.”

The knights smiled their awkward but good-natured agreement.

Rishe worked tirelessly, and before long, the chambers where she would spend the night were ready. The knights offered to carry in the bed, which she allowed.

While they brought in furniture, Rishe started cleaning another room. She had run out of clean water, so she quietly slipped out to the well without informing the knights. It wasn't quite fair to them, but these were the palace grounds. Surely she didn't need to be chaperoned *everywhere*.

Besides, they're guards in name only. They're clearly just here to report my movements to Arnold Hein, Rishe reflected as she walked through a courtyard full of flowers, bucket in hand. Iridescent butterflies cavorted playfully around her feet. *He doesn't seem in a hurry to introduce me to the king. Although if I'm just a hostage, that doesn't surprise me.*

She hoped she got to meet the current emperor at least once. The future Arnold's violent conquest only began after he killed the man and made himself emperor, after all.

I wonder what happened to Arnold Hein after I died in my past life. Did he reign supreme after winning his war? Or did some country manage to put a stop to his conquest? Whatever the case, I absolutely cannot allow him to start a conflict this time. Being the empress of a wartime nation sounds like so much work! The very thought is unacceptable!

Perhaps they could divorce, but Rishe had a feeling that if Arnold decided to discard her in the middle of a war, she would fail in her mission to make it past the age of twenty. Better to avoid the situation all together.

Wait. When she thought about it, the cause of every single one of Rishe's deaths was Arnold and his war. *I died fighting. I died of an infectious disease I*

caught while treating battlefield injuries. I died when Galkhein's army invaded...

Looking at her six lives, all of them had ended in more or less the same way.

Rishe found herself crouched on the ground, cradling her head in her hands. *Maybe we should get a divorce right now.* But it wasn't in Rishe's nature to take back her decisions once she'd made them.

If I leave, I'll probably just die in some war-related disaster again. If I can't live apart from him, I should take this opportunity to learn everything that I can.

Rishe didn't know the cause of her repeating lives, but there was no guarantee that the loops were infinite. She had to operate under the possibility that this life could be her last. This required some thought, but standing around seething with anxiety wouldn't help.

Right now I'll focus on cleaning. Once the bath is here, I'll scrub off all the dust and travel exhaustion. And then I can finally relax!

Brimming with new determination, she stood up and headed for the well. She was forestalled by the sound of jeering giggles.

"Aww, look at the new girl, trying so hard," said one voice.

"All the enthusiasm in the world won't make a difference," said another. "We're going to be the crown princess's maids, not you."

The first added, "Hey, are you even listening? Stop wasting your time!"

Rishe heard a weak scream, followed by a thump, like a body hitting the ground. She broke into a run, finding a blonde girl sprawled in the dirt, surrounded by four other women.

"Are you all right?" Rishe hurried over to help the girl up. Her maid's uniform—a loose navy-blue dress with a white apron—was smeared with mud. The others were dressed identically.

"Who are you?" one of the girls snapped at Rishe. She had a mop of blazing-red hair. "Another newbie?"

An understandable mistake. Rishe's dress was simple, free of ornamentation, and her hair was bound back in a ponytail to keep it out of the way. She was dust-streaked, sweaty, and carrying a bucket in her arms.

Telling them who I am will be more trouble than it's worth. Her silence only angered the girls more.

"Are you one of the crown princess's maids? They've been snatching up every new girl. Those pretty hands of yours don't look like they've ever held a broom," said one of them.

"Unfortunately for you, we've been working here three years, and *we'll* be the ones to serve Prince Arnold as the maids of his palace."

"Can you stand? Oh, good, it looks like you're not injured." Rische helped the girl up out of the dirt.

"Hey, don't ignore us!" the redheaded maid shouted. "You've got some nerve. If you want to make it here, you'll know your place! I doubt the two of you will last a week!"

Rische didn't respond, her attention snagging on something else. The redhead was carrying curtains, probably to bring them to the wash. Rische stared at them so hard the maid began to shift uncomfortably. "What's your problem?"

"You should wait to wash those," Rische said.

The girl glared daggers at her. "Excuse me? Are you telling me it's too late in the day? You really are an amateur! The light lasts longer in the spring, you know. And it's hot today. There'll be plenty of—"

"It's going to rain, is all."

The maids exchanged glances. "How can you be so sure?"

"Look at the clouds amassing. The butterflies and the bees are flying low. The moisture in the air will make the drying take longer."

"What?"

Another maid spoke up in a soft voice. "Diana, you were the one who said we should take the initiative to wash the bigger pieces. You said the crown prince would choose us for his household!"

"Stop putting the blame on me! This isn't my fault." An indignant flush crept over the redhead's face. "There's no way some upstart can tell what time it's going to rain! The weather is going to be fantastic all day. Come on, we're

hauling these over to the wash!”

The three girls meekly followed Diana.

Rishe sighed, turning to the blonde girl. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine.” The girl’s gaze darted around nervously. “I’m Elsie. Thank you for helping me.” Her face was studiously blank, but from the way she struggled with her words, Rishe could tell she was being genuine.

“Don’t worry about it,” Rishe said. “Your uniform seems to have fared less well.”

“Oh no.” Elsie looked down at herself. Her face remained vacant, but she seemed sad. “And I just got it.”

“You can get the dirt out if you wash it straight away. It’s going to rain, but this dress should dry quickly. Use lots of soap, but don’t scrub it by hand—scrape the mud off with a brush.”

“Why a brush?”

“Because your fingers will just grind dirt into the threads. A brush is more porous.”

The young sons of the family Rishe served spent their time tumbling in the dirt, and she had plenty of experience scraping mud out of clothes. She could even salvage dirty socks that had spent days crumpled in the corner.

“Do you... Are you...” Elsie trailed off, blinking rapidly a couple of times before finally looking Rishe in the eyes. “Are you the crown princess’s maid?”

Unsure how to answer, Rishe couldn’t meet her eyes.

After parting ways with Elsie, Rishe returned to the detached wing with her fresh water. She put clean sheets on the bed the knights had installed, satisfied that she had a comfortable place to sleep. This room also had the highest-up balcony in the whole detached palace.

Taking a break, she wandered out onto the balcony and looked off over the capital, the golden afternoon tinged with the onset of twilight. The day was

fresh with a recent rain, the air clear enough to see for miles. The spring breeze felt good against her skin, sweaty from cleaning. Rishe leaned against the railing, leaning her head back and closing her eyes.

She felt like collapsing into bed immediately, but she desperately needed a wash. Still, she didn't want to pull herself away from the view and the breeze just yet. When she resumed gazing out absentmindedly, something her mother once said drifted back to her.

"Rishe, there is no need for you to think for yourself."

She frowned, the memories coming thick and fast now.

"You mustn't forget that the duty of our family is to live our lives fully devoted to the kings of the land. You're smart, but all the thinking in the world won't do a woman any good. You need only concern yourself with how best to serve the crown prince."

"Studies? Focus on social etiquette—that's what you need for navigating high society. The crown prince's bride must be flawless. Your smile is lacking. You must always strive to appear amiable."

Rishe breathed out a long sigh. *When I was fifteen, their lectures were the only thing I thought about.*

Her parents preached constantly. *"A woman's true happiness is to marry a suitable man and give birth to his heirs."*

"But, Mother..."

Objection was not permitted. Any argument was immediately dispensed with. As a woman, Rishe could not inherit her father's title. Her only value was in her marriage.

Despite knowing now that the opinions of others were as worthless as empty titles, the words still echoed in her memories.

Rishe's fingertips twitched, and she opened her eyes. Unmoving, she said, "Shouldn't you be seeing to your duties?"

"More hidden depths, I see," came a voice tinged with pleasure. Rishe straightened and turned. There was Arnold, leaning against the door to the

balcony. “You seem able to sense my approach no matter how far or how hard I try.”

“You’re quite naughty, aren’t you? You’ve been making your presence known little by little, emanating threat, to see how quickly I catch on.”

“So you noticed that as well.” Arnold joined Rishe on the balcony. She tensed, but all he did was cast a curious glance at the view. “What were you looking at?”

“The city.” Rishe was hardly going to tell him she’d been looking at nothing, merely ruminating on her mother’s overbearing advice. The view from the balcony *was* spectacular, though. “What’s that over there?”

“You mean the library? The state invested funds to expand it. We have books from all over the world.”

“Really? You have a library that big?” Rishe’s eyes sparkled with delight. She pointed out another building. “What about that spire? It’s beautiful.”

“The church and clock tower. The bells ring out the hour.”

“Ooh, how wonderful! And it looks like there’s a rather big market there too?”

“Yes, the largest market in the city. Carts line up in the early morning. Most of the offerings are made fresh every day.”

“Amazing! And what about that pretty mountain over there?”

Rishe tried and failed to contain her excitement. She couldn’t help but imagine what seeing all these places up close would be like. The grand library, the beautiful church that told the time, and the morning market with fresh, delicious food—she wanted to experience it all.

Seeing Arnold’s bemused face, she said, “What?”

“I’m just wondering where all this interest is coming from,” he said. “You were so reluctant to come, yet here you are, brimming with curiosity for my city.”

“Well...” she trailed off, unsure of how to respond.

What should I say? Should I just tell him the truth?

This wasn't a secret, but talking about her hopes and dreams to the man who had killed her was a little awkward. A strange self-consciousness settled on her, her cheeks heating as she mumbled, "Because I've always wanted to."

Arnold looked at her keenly. "Wanted to what?"

"I've always wanted to come here."

During her life as a merchant, Rishe developed her single dream to visit everywhere in the world. That dream was cut tragically short when only one country remained: Galkhein.

In each of her consecutive lives, Rishe's priority became staying alive. Every time, without fail, just as she found her footing, the world was plunged into chaos. She never had the chance to see Galkhein. This betrothal was her chance. "It's probably why I agreed to marry you," she added after a moment's hesitation.

Arnold swept a tepid glance over the city. "There's nothing here worth seeing."

"That's not true! The places you just told me about sound amazing! Your citizens are clean and happy, your knights are proper and kind. Oh, and another —"

Rishe broke off enumerating Galkhein's charms as Arnold turned to look at her. His face was impassively calm, but something seemed to pass by underneath, like a shadow in deep water.

"I'm sorry," Rishe said. "Did I say something odd?"

"I'm just amazed you could be so unaware of yourself."

Wh-what a rude thing to—

"I've never met anyone like you. No one has ever spoken to me the way you do. I don't know any girls of your class with the knowledge or the physical abilities you possess. Noblewomen don't concern themselves with such things."

Rishe, there is no need for you to think for yourself.

She frowned. “Perhaps you’re right, but everything I’ve learned is precious to me. No one can take my skills away—I value them with my life. Some may say that my knowledge is worthless, but it makes no difference to me.” She turned from the balcony, fixing him with a piercing gaze. “I’m the one who decides what I value.”

Rishe had clawed free of her mother and father’s indoctrination a long time ago. Man, woman—it didn’t matter. She could do anything. Being queen was not the culmination of her life; she wouldn’t trade her freedom for anything.

Arnold matched her intensity. “You’re right.” He gently cupped her cheek in a one hand, swiping his thumb along the line of her jaw, smearing dust. “Live your life here however you wish. I vow to do my utmost to protect you.”

“Huh?”

His vehemence took her by surprise. Arnold had every right to demand she act the part of a proper consort. This was a political marriage; Rishe was essentially a hostage, after all. Yet here he was, cosigning her misbehavior. Moreover, he was all but swearing to defend her from the consequences.

“Why?”

“You know why. I’m enamored with you.” Arnold fed her the same line. “I know you said you don’t care about other people’s approval, but I like your asymmetrical talents. I don’t find them useless at all.”

Rishe didn’t know how to respond.

“I thought I’d already made that clear.” He took his hand back, drawing away, stopping just on the threshold. He turned back to a stunned Rishe and said, “Let me know if there’s anything you desire. I realize I just broke our agreement—the one about not touching you.”

And with that, he was gone.

Shaken, Rishe sank to the floor of the balcony. *I can’t predict him at all! Just what is Arnold Hein planning?*

The quiet of evening fell over the imperial capital of Galkhein.

“Mmm.”

Sunshine streamed through the window as Rishe roused from sleep. She rolled over, basking in the morning light. The wall she expected wasn't there, and the bed seemed larger than usual. Taking advantage of it, she stretched out as far as she could.

Was this her chamber at home? Or maybe she was a merchant again, spending a night at the desert king's palace. Perhaps this was her bed of straw from her life as a maid? Her memories met and interwove as she drifted into wakefulness.

When Rishe finally opened her eyes, she grew even more confused.

Light blue curtains surrounded the bed, thin enough to allow sunlight to pass through. She pulled them aside to find herself in a bare room devoid of furniture and carpet.

Oh, right. She didn't need to report for morning training, tend to her herb garden, prepare breakfast, or see how the bottles she had brewed overnight were coming along.

Realizing that, Rishe buried her face in the pillow. “So soft,” she murmured.

Judging by the position of the sun, it was about six o'clock in the morning. She was pretty sure she had gone to bed around midnight last night.

I slept for six whole hours? Rishe couldn't believe it. Generally, she was used to getting about four hours of sleep. On bad days, at the height of an emergency as a knight or apothecary, she wouldn't even get that much.

I've got nothing but cleaning on the schedule today. Hostages can sleep in, right? At least a little? Excitement suffused her at the thought, but that was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Lady Rishe, are you awake? It's Oliver—Prince Arnold's attendant.”

Rishe sat up with a start. “I'm awake!”

Oliver continued to speak through the door. “I apologize for bothering you at such an early hour. I'm here with a delivery.”

“Just a moment!” Rishe slipped out of the bed, dressed quickly, and tugged

the bed's canopy closed. She opened the door to find Oliver standing in the hallway with a polite smile.

He apologized again. "This was the only time I could slip away from His Highness's office. I'm glad to see that you're already dressed."

"Not at all." Rische paused, stepping back to allow him inside. "Oh my. You look exhausted."

Oliver grimaced. "Is it that obvious? We've been climbing through mountains of paperwork, but never mind me. His Highness has been working around the clock."

Rische thought back to yesterday, how he had come all the way out to the balcony. He should have used that spare time to sleep. "He's in high demand, isn't he? He was even working on the trip over."

"He finished all the work he brought along with us," Oliver confirmed. "Now he's dealing with everything that piled up during his visit to Hermitry."

"Oh." Rische grimaced in sympathy. He may have killed her in a past life, but she wouldn't wish the bureaucracy of kingship on anyone. "It's a shame he had to put his work on hold to attend a silly engagement party."

"No matter. That party was how a committed bachelor finally found a bride."

His smile was sincere, but Rische knew better. She spread her arms. "Go on. Shall I spin around so you have a better view?"

Oliver blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"You're looking me over like I'm a horse for sale. If there's anything I can help you with, please let me know."

Oliver's brows went up. He let out a little breath of resignation. "His Highness was right. You do possess the keen perception of a knight. Of course, I'm purely an amateur myself."

I'd say this was a merchant's sixth sense, rather than battle intuition.

This wasn't the first time Rische had caught Oliver looking at her. It reminded her of the way her noble customers would examine a product, assessing worth and authenticity. Or a merchant weeding out potential merchandise from a

wide array of choices.

In other words, he was appraising her.



Oliver moved into a deep, sweeping bow. “My sincerest apologies, my lady. I have been unaccountably rude to my lord’s consort. My behavior was unacceptable.”

Rishe shook her head. “Please don’t, it’s fine.” It wasn’t unreasonable for the prince’s closest attendant to be wary of strangers. But it did make her curious. “How long have you worked for Arnold? Have you always been a valet?”

“I trained as a squire, actually,” Oliver replied. “But I was injured and dismissed from the order. His Highness took me into his household soon after. I have served him for nearly a decade.”

“Then maybe *you* can answer this,” Rishe said. “Why is Prince Arnold so very intent on making me his wife?”

Oliver hesitated, as if weighing the pros and cons of speaking, “To be quite honest, I was as surprised as you were. He’s always insisted he had no interest in marriage. But the sight of you in Hermitage has changed his mind. Apparently.”

So not even his attendant understood his motives. Rishe remained at a complete loss.

“If I may, however?” Oliver mistook Rishe’s confusion for anxiety and added, “I have served Prince Arnold for a long time, and never before have I seen him so happy. When he is with you, he laughs. His smiles are sincere.”

Rishe was taken aback. She’d figured all of Arnold’s laughter and teasing was at her expense. His own private jokes.

“Are you...unhappy with him?” Oliver ventured. “With his looks, His Highness is exceedingly popular with the ladies of the court, you know.”

“I’m sure he has many admirers.” She paused. “Would you really call the way he acts around me ‘happy’? To me, it seems more like a cat with a mouse.”

Oliver laughed. He didn’t deny it. “I am pleased you understand His Highness so well. Oh, I nearly forgot. Here.”

He held out a sheaf of three documents. “This is the guest list for your wedding. His Highness bids you look over it.”

“Thank you,” Rishe said, pleasantly surprised. She hadn’t even needed to ask.

She gave it a quick glance, quickly identifying the most prominent and powerful names.

King Zahad, Prince Kyle, Princess Harriet. And from the Kingdom of Domana, we have Lord Jonal attending as the representative of the king. No surprise there.

More than a wedding guest register, this was a list of key people from the countries Arnold would go on to antagonize. Even before the murder of the king and the start of the war, there must have been a trigger—a sea change in the affairs of state. Everyone on this list was most likely involved.

King Zahad. I hope we can be friends again like in my first life. Hmm... Prince Kyle is rather frail. I hope he isn't working himself too hard. He has a strong sense of responsibility—he'll attend the wedding even though it'll be a long trip.

The sight of these names filled Rishe with a longing for those lives, for the people she'd once known. And sometime in the very near future, they would all be Galkhein's enemies.

If I take matters into my own hands, perhaps I can salvage some of these relationships before they sour. Even if we aren't allies, we don't have to be enemies. Anything to stave off the outbreak of war.

Oliver had no idea what was going through Rishe's head. Brightly, he continued their conversation. "The ceremony will be held in three months' time. All preparations must be complete by then. And now...we need to discuss tonight's party."

"Tonight's what?"

Oliver stiffened. "Did His Highness not tell you?"

"No, he most certainly did not! There's to be a party?"

"Ugh, not again!" Oliver dug his knuckles into his forehead.

Rishe put two and two together. She hesitated, then said, "So there is one, then. As you must know, His Highness is trying to stamp it down without telling me."

"I'm sorry," Oliver replied. "He should have mentioned it to you. You don't

need to attend, but he will. At least, I hope he will. I think I managed to convince him.”

She sympathized with Oliver. Under normal circumstances, it would be unheard of for the crown prince and his fiancée to fail to appear at a banquet. “Don’t worry, Oliver. I’ll go.”

Oliver let out a sigh of relief. “Really? Thank you so much, my lady. I’ll put finding you a maid at the top of my to-do list.”

“No need.” Rishe smiled. “I can prepare for the party on my own.”

This maid-selection process made Rishe uneasy. After witnessing that exchange between the servants in the garden, she imagined quarrels breaking out all through the palace. And she doubted the disputes would go away even after they decided.

Oliver frowned. “But won’t dressing be difficult without a lady’s maid?”

She shook her head. “I can do my hair and put on a gown by myself. I brought dresses and cosmetics from home. Don’t worry.”

Rishe ignored Oliver’s stunned look, already reevaluating her cleaning plans.

The first thing Rishe said to Arnold that night was, “Your Highness, I have a request.” Her gown rustled as she leaned in close. “I would like some herb seed and a corner of the gardens. I made a list. I hope we can discuss this in more detail later.”

Arnold was silent a moment. “Rishe.”

“What? Didn’t you tell me to let you know if there was anything I wanted?” She looked at him quizzically, and Arnold sighed.

She’d heard that he’d finished his mountain of work and even managed to sleep for a while. He was dressed in his usual military black, trimmed with a red mantle and black gloves.

Arnold shook his head. “That’s not what I mean. I’m guessing that Oliver didn’t tell you the reason for this party? It’s merely for appearance’s sake. I need to look like I’m searching for a bride within our borders as well. There’s no

reason for you to attend.”

It made sense. The crown prince—the greatest catch in the kingdom—marrying a foreigner without even the slightest nod to propriety would invite unwanted discontent from the nobility.

“However, we’re betrothed,” Arnold said. “This whole evening is merely a formality. And with news that you’re my ‘hostage’ going around, you’ll be an object of curiosity. I don’t want to put you through that.”

“Well, I already went to the trouble of getting ready.” Rishe plucked at her soft blue dress, draped in fluttering layers around her like a flower bud. She’d braided her hair, decorating it with accessories. Her makeup was light, her shoes polished to a mirror shine. Her only jewelry was a pair of pearl earrings.

“Rishe...”

“Your Highness, the court may consider my status as a captive princess shameful in the extreme, but I don’t.” She’d chosen this course, after all.

Arnold was again watching her with a mixture of wonder and confusion.

“So don’t worry,” she said, extending her hand. “Feel free to show off your fiancée.”

Arnold relented, his dashing smile creeping out once again. “Very well. I should take advantage of this opportunity to touch my betrothed.”

“We’re wearing gloves.”

Arnold took Rishe’s hand.

A throng of guests was gathered in the ballroom as a group of musicians performed on a platform. Women in gowns stood clustered, while gentlemen in military attire grouped together. A mere glance was enough to tell their clothes were of the highest quality. They mingled happily, making small talk with glasses in hand.

Rishe let her hand rest on Arnold’s arm as she paused at the threshold to take it all in. “This is a bigger event than I was expecting.”

“Is it? I’d say it’s a rather small gathering, actually.”

“Maybe for a military powerhouse,” Rishe muttered.

Yet another reminder of Galkhein’s wealth took her off guard. Arnold just looked bored.

“The size doesn’t matter,” he said. “In the end, they’re only here for gossip. Look, here they come.”

In the blink of an eye, they were surrounded by guests.

“Prince Arnold, thank you for gracing us with an invitation,” said one man. “Such a pleasure.”

“The pleasure is mine, Lord Abel,” Arnold drawled.

“Your Highness! We were so glad to hear of your safe return,” another guest chirped. “Please, our daughter is simply dying to be regaled with tales of your trip.”

“I can’t imagine I’d have anything particularly exciting to share with her,” Arnold said curtly.

After the last few days, Rishe found this look of glazed apathy disturbing. His good looks only compounded it—he was so handsome that every expression was stark.

He looks more like Emperor Arnold Hein now, but still not the same.

Arnold appeared to notice her watching him. When he looked at her, his sourness disappeared, replaced by a genuine smile. All around him, women found themselves flushing. Arnold paid no heed to their fervent gazes, instead leaning in to give Rishe a brief moment of consideration.

Then he leaned in close enough to kiss her.

“A dull trip,” he said again, pulling away. “But fortuitous. Without it, I would have never met the woman destined to be my wife.”

A shocked murmur rolled through the crowd. Rishe, who hadn’t recovered from seeing Arnold’s beautiful face at close range, barely noticed the looks of utter loathing the assembled women were throwing her.

“H-His Highness is *smiling*? At his hostage bride?”

“He called her his wife?! He’s never even looked at us!”

They were whispers, but they carried.

A portly man stepped forward with his daughter in tow. “Your Highness, do you mean to say that this lovely young woman is your fiancée?”

Every eye in the ballroom was on Rishe, alight with curiosity, envy, or schemes. None of them could hide their contempt. But Rishe didn’t falter.

This is nothing compared to being publicly dumped in a banquet hall. And I’ve done that seven times!

She offered a polite smile and an astoundingly correct curtsy. Left leg at a diagonal behind the right, back straight, head bowed. “How do you do? My name is Rishe Irmgard Weitzner.”

Even the most hostile guests could find nothing impolite in her greeting, no sign of rough manners from the rustic daughter of a backwater nation. Rishe had years of training in expectation of ascending to the throne. Occasionally, habits from her other lives slipped through, but Arnold appeared to be the only one who noticed.

Now he was looking at her with satisfaction. “Lady Rishe has only just arrived, and her acquaintances are few and far between. I hope I can count on you all to hold me accountable should I prove an incompetent husband.”

“B-but of course, Your Highness.”

“Come, Rishe.” Arnold guided her out of the ring of spectators. The stares continued to follow them as they walked away.

Rishe dropped her voice to a whisper. “You sure know how to invite the ire of women.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“The way you harped on about me. Everything you said was tailor-made to stoke their jealousy. You’ve gained me enemies, so thanks for that.”

Arnold snorted. “Everything I said was to *protect* you from enemies. They need to know you aren’t just some trophy they can eliminate without recourse. We need to show them this to forestall any potential moves against you in the

future.

“Show them what, exactly?”

“That I’ll protect you no matter what.”

He said it with such nonchalance that it brought her up short. *Protect me? Arnold Hein, protect me?*

Such an ironic position to take. She couldn’t tell him that, of course. Her response came out somewhat strangled. “I doubt they’ll be anything to worry about. In fact, the biggest threat facing me is you.”

“Oh? And why do you say that?”

“For many reasons, the most obvious being that I’m no match for you with a blade.” As much as it pained her to admit it.

Arnold looked pleased. “Perhaps we should duel.”

“Yes, please! And if it wouldn’t be an intrusion—I would like to train with you.” If she studied him, she could learn his strategies and his attack patterns. She’d never be a match in speed or raw power, but any insight would be invaluable.

“Sure.” Arnold shrugged. “I don’t mind.”

“Truly?” Her eyes glittered with anticipation.

He chuckled. “Your answers never disappoint me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Oh, it looks like they’re playing a new song.”

A soft melody drifted across the hall. The crowd divided, heading toward the center of the floor or against the wall. The next dance was starting, and everyone was waiting to see what the crown prince and his new fiancée would do.

“We don’t have to dance if you don’t want to,” Arnold said.

“Oh? As it happens, I like dancing.” Plus, she couldn’t resist a blatant challenge. She offered him her hand.

“Very well, then.” Arnold only hesitated for a moment before taking it and steering her gently to an empty spot on the floor. He didn’t seem like the

dancing type, but his movements were slick and effortless. Facing one another, they joined hands. Arnold wrapped his other arm around her waist.

Ooh. His hand felt huge against her back. She realized she was breathing a little faster. They'd never been this close before.

No, that isn't quite true. This is the second time. Rishe's final memories from her last life flashed vividly through her mind.

This was indeed the *second* time they had been this close—the first had ended with a sword through her chest.

Emperor Arnold Hein had single-handedly decimated the knights in the castle. Rishe stood in the midst of the carnage, breath ragged as she gripped the hilt of her sword, slick with her own blood. She was the last line of defense. The chamber behind her housed the royal family.

If they could reach the hidden passageways, the young prince and his party could find shelter with their allies across the border. Rishe and the other knights were prepared to sacrifice their lives to allow the royal family to survive. Their escape meant victory.

Bells tolled out, urging flight. *All is lost. Run.* Rishe managed to graze Arnold's cheek with her blade before she looked down to find his jet-black sword blooming out of her chest.

She remembered how it burned, as if the blade was made of fire. It was heat, not pain, but her breathing grew labored, and when Emperor Arnold Hein withdrew his sword, Rishe crumpled.

He knelt by her side and whispered something.

The words were seared into her memory. Rishe squeezed Arnold's hand as they danced.

I'll be the bully this time.

Rishe shifted her weight back, slipping out of the hold on her waist. She broke Arnold's lead and spun, drifting on the harmony of the dance. She took him by surprise; his eyes went wide.

I wonder what you'll do when you're no longer on top, Your Highness. Her

smile was a declaration of war. Watching him attempt to follow her lead would be delightful. She pulled his hand toward her, attempting to move them into a spin.

But Arnold held fast. He planted his hand on her waist and turned them in a different direction, using her inertia against her. *Hey!* As a result, Rishe twirled by herself on the spot.

She didn't miss a step. She turned elegantly, the hem of her dress whispering across the ballroom floor. She heard appreciative murmurs from the wallflowers lined up watching.

Despite that, Rishe took it as a defeat. Round one to Arnold.

So...you can think on your feet. How about this?

Arnold remained unruffled, evading her next scheme like it was nothing. He grinned down at her, his eyes shining with a dare.

He thinks I can't beat him. His ease vexed her, but it was his smugness that made her angry.

She let out a hard breath, attempting a maneuver to lure him in while turning. He leaned back, not falling for it at all.

He's just too good at changing his center of gravity! She kept her astonishment under wraps, but she felt it. *Despite how close we're dancing, I can't throw off his timing at all. He's sidestepped all my attempts, and he takes back the lead the second I let down my guard!*

It made her increasingly angry. She twirled and stepped as the dance dictated, all the while feeling out for moments of weakness. Arnold played along with her game, completely unruffled.

Every single time. I'm doing my utmost to trip him up, but he doesn't even seem annoyed! At this point she'd just settle for any reaction at all.

Their unusual dance style had gathered a crowd. Rishe paid them no mind, focused only on her goal. Then something occurred to her, and her breath caught in her throat.

Wait a minute, he has left an opening. It's the same one from before. She

thought back to their fight to the death, to that moment when she had managed to draw blood. That may indeed have been his only weakness.

If I strike the same way—huh? Before she could try, Arnold appeared to lose patience, wrapping his arm around her waist. He bent her back into a dip so deep it felt like he'd pulled a carpet from under her feet. She yelped, grabbing at him reflexively, clinging tight. His big hands gripped her securely enough to mitigate the sensation of falling. Relief flooded through her, and she felt a laugh rumble against her ear.

The music came to an end with one last ringing note. She blinked. *The dance is over?*

A hush fell over the ballroom. Then cheers broke out, followed by a round of applause.

"That was incredible!"

The watching nobles crowded in.

"You two moved in such perfect harmony!"

"I was on the edge of my seat. I felt like I was watching a sword duel!"

"Is this a dance from Hermitry? I've never seen such steps before."

"Uh, well..." Rishe floundered. She glanced up at Arnold, who appeared to be enjoying her struggle. She'd get no help from him.

Rishe dealt with the barrage of questions as best she could, letting the crowd sweep them into the dining room, which was set up for a buffet-style meal. She made sure to greet every guest, riveting their faces into her memory.

She must have been acting peculiar, because Arnold eventually said, "Rishe, I think the wine is getting to you. Shall we get some fresh air?"

Rishe hadn't touched a single drop. In fact, she'd been caught up in so many conversations that she hadn't even had the chance to eat, but she had experience working on an empty stomach. She accepted Arnold's encouragement as the escape it was.

Just when I least expect it, he'll act the gentleman. Maybe he'd remembered her demand for a carefree life of doing nothing.

Rishe cast a charming look across the crowd. "Thank you for your consideration, Your Highness. Forgive me." She gave a polite bow before quietly slipping away.

She didn't head straight to the balcony but rather slowly walked around the hall. There was only so much she could find out glued to Arnold's side all night.

I need information. Galkhein's political landscape was a mystery to me through all my past lives. I only know the rumors that made it abroad.

Although she knew of Arnold's eventual patricide, she had no concept of the circumstances leading up to it. She needed a better picture of the factions and power balance inside the court. The lives these people led.

I know better than to believe wartime gossip. This Arnold Hein is a lot different from what I'd heard he was like at nineteen. He's not as diabolical as the rumors led me to believe. He likes to push, but he isn't unkind. The thought drifted across her mind, leaving her conflicted. Well, he's not unkind now. But I still don't like not knowing his motives. And he's a bit of a jerk, to be honest.

She tried to settle her mind and just observe. Gathering intelligence was necessary to lead a long, carefree life lazing around the palace.

If I recall correctly, that's Lord Hannawald. He seems to be on good terms with Count Gayle. Duke Hudemann and Duke Teinitz are having a friendly enough conversation, yet they don't seem close. Rishe ticked off the names of people she'd met, committing them to memory.

A wave of sweet perfume wafted over her. A pretty girl with soft blonde hair had appeared at her side. "How do you do, Lady Rishe? I'm Cornelia Thea Toona."

Duke Toona's family was the thirty-first house she'd met tonight.

Rishe smiled graciously. "Rishe Irmgard Weitzner. A pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine." Cornelia smiled sweetly. Her eyes were big and bright, her lips full. She held a glass in each hand and offered one to Rishe. "Wine? I see you're empty-handed."

A gaggle of other ladies nearby began giggling among themselves.

“How dare she act so haughty when she’s a captive. It’s time for her learn just what she is. A pawn to be played and discarded.”

“She should enjoy her time on Prince Arnold’s arm while she can.”

“She *is* from a minor nation, after all.”

As Rishe took note of their whispers, Cornelia gazed at her with doe eyes. “Does my offering offend you in some way?”

If I remember correctly, House Toona holds a vast territory in southern Galkhein.

Rishe held out a hand to accept the glass. “How could it? Thank you, Lady Cornelia.”

Before Rishe could touch the glass, Cornelia gave a dramatic shout. “Oh dear! My hand slipped!” She dropped it, quite obviously on purpose. Without thinking, Rishe grabbed her skirts and leaned back, plucking the glass out of the air with the other hand.

Cornelia let out a cry of surprise as Rishe caught the wine before any could spill. She swirled the glass and brought it to her nose to breathe in the bouquet.

Hmm... That’s mashed capsicum. Where did she even get that? What a waste of perfectly good wine. And why bother spicing it enough to singe the tongue if she just planned to ruin my dress? Pick a plan, my dear.

Hiding her exasperation, Rishe smiled brightly. “I’ve never had a wine quite like this. What an unusual scent.”

Cornelia bit her lip in frustration. Rishe beamed at her. *You’ve got such a pretty face, Lady Toona. Why don’t you smile?*

Rishe leaned in close to Cornelia. “This vintage isn’t available where I’m from. I’m ever so anxious to learn more. Should I perhaps invite Prince Arnold over to enjoy a glass? Which tray did you get this from?”

“What? Oh, um...” Rishe had a policy of never backing down from a fight, but it seemed Cornelia didn’t share it. “S-sorry, but I don’t remember. Such a large hall, you see.”

“A shame. I’ll just give His Highness this one, then. I’ll be sure to let him know

who it's from."

"Uh, wait!" Cornelia rapidly shook her head. "I-I got that glass for you, so I think you should—you know what? Never mind! Maybe I should just take that—oh no!"

Rishe ignored the ashen-faced Cornelia, raising the glass and swallowing down a gulp.

"I-I can't believe..."

"Such a spicy flavor, just as I imagined." Rishe smiled again to the assembled group's astonishment. "What a *warm* welcome. I do hope the two of us can spend more time together. Perhaps...a tea party?"

"Th-the two of us?" Cornelia stammered.

"Yes. I want to know all about House Toona."

Cornelia looked flabbergasted, but she recovered herself and nodded.

That should do. One of Rishe's eventual plans required a plot of land in a temperate climate. House Toona's would likely be perfect, but she needed to confirm a few things with Cornelia. *Never back down from a fight. Even further...*

She recalled the words of her mentor from her days as a merchant.

Don't bother with fights you can't win.

The other ladies fled, fearful of this strange girl who gulped down painfully spicy wine like it was nothing.

Rishe retreated to the empty balcony to enjoy the music, grimacing with every stinging mouthful of wine. She drank it in decreasing sips until Arnold joined her.

"What are you making that face for?"

Rishe swirled the glass. "Don't worry, it's not you. It's just this wine is so spicy."

"Spicy? The wine is?"

“Mm. It’s seasoned with capsicum. I barely managed to get that first mouthful down without gagging.”

Arnold swiped the glass from her hand. “Don’t tell me this was a poisoning attempt!”

Rishe clicked her tongue in annoyance at her own lack of vigilance. No one else would be able to grab something from her so easily.

Arnold glared at the wine. “You don’t need to drink this. I’ll get rid of it.”

“Hey, give that back! They ruined a perfectly good glass of wine because of me. I’m not going to waste it.” She grabbed it back and took another sip, shuddering at the taste.

Arnold glowered. “Tell me who did this. I’ll have them executed.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You don’t kill people like her—you use them.” Just the tiniest bit of wine to go, but it was getting harder to make herself drink it. She gave the glass a reproachful look, then glanced back at Arnold. “Oh, and I owe you an apology.”

“Do you?”

“I used your name to defend myself.” The girls had only backed off when she threatened to tattle to Arnold. Rishe found that sort of thing inelegant in the extreme, and she was embarrassed.

Arnold sighed at Rishe’s apologetic bow. “There’s nothing wrong with a wife invoking her husband’s name.”

Rishe hesitated. “We’re not married yet.”

“That’s a formality. It’s as good as done, if you ask me.”

“I...see.”

He took her distraction as an opportunity to swipe her glass back. Instead of dumping it out, Arnold gulped the rest of it down.

“Damn, that packs a punch,” he grumbled.

“I told you that!” Rishe snapped. “Are you all right? Let me get you some water!”

“I’m fine. But now you’ve fulfilled your obligation to the wine, haven’t you?”

Rishe didn’t know what to say. He’d helped her—not by taking charge but by following her lead. Without cutting her down and telling her she was being foolish. Without rolling his eyes and dismissing her desires as trifles.

“Thank you,” Rishe said stiffly, which just made him laugh.

“What were you thinking about when we were dancing?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You were thinking about someone else, weren’t you? Who?”

Rishe didn’t know a delicate way to say *I was thinking about a future version of you I met in another life*.

“Hmm?” His tone was oddly light, teasing even. But the gleam in his hunter’s eyes said she wouldn’t get away so easily.

Obviously, Rishe couldn’t give him an honest answer. “I wasn’t thinking about anyone else. I was worried about you.”

“Why?”

This was the closest she could come to the truth. “Were you injured here?” She patted her own left shoulder with her forefinger.

Arnold went silent. His left shoulder was slightly slower to react than his right—if his right was at one hundred, then his left was at maybe ninety-eight. It was hardly noticeable, but Rishe had picked up on it. He was right-handed, and she wouldn’t have noticed it if they’d been dancing normally.

That, and if it hadn’t been for memories from her past life.

Rishe had only managed to inflict a single injury on him. An instant, a moment’s hesitation where she saw her chance and slashed left. Of course, he’d shrugged off the injury and effortlessly run her through.

“Heh.” Arnold finally broke his silence with grim laughter. His eyes sent shivers down her spine, cold and bewitching. In lieu of an answer, he reached for his collar, unfastening the clasp with a snap and drawing his jacket open with a rough tug.

Oh my.

Rishe drew in a breath. A great scar was engraved into the nape of his neck, just low enough to be concealed by clothing. It looked several years old. “It’s an old wound. It continues to the top of my shoulder and pulls the skin taut.”

“How awful.” Rishe couldn’t help but reach out to gingerly touch the nape of his neck.

Arnold accepted her touch without a word. She’d half expected to be slapped aside.

Her fingers slowly traced the shape of it. She could feel the rough skin through her gloves.

He must have gotten this over a decade ago. Someone stabbed him—and not just once or twice. They must have done it over and over to make this scar pattern.

Her medical training had her shuddering at the image of a nine-year-old Arnold ashen and trembling with blood loss. The fact that he’d survived and retained the use of his arm was incredible. And then to go on to wield a sword so skillfully—his suffering must have been immense.

“Only a few people know about this injury. You’re the first to notice on your own.”

“How did it happen?”

That grim smile returned as he looked down at Rishe. With the moon hanging behind him, he was as opaque as ever, but Rishe understood the sentiment.

I shouldn’t pry.



Rishe pulled her hand away, and that ominous smile that sent chills down her spine disappeared. Arnold put his jacket back in order, reclasping it at the neck.

Someone tried to kill Arnold Hein about ten years ago. But who and why? Rishe cast her eyes down as she ruminated. *The most obvious beneficiaries of a dead crown prince would be potential heirs and those loyal to them. I believe Arnold has a younger brother, but I haven't met him yet.*

Odd. Rishe might be a hostage, but shouldn't she meet her future relatives? Perhaps it was Arnold's doing and not the will of the imperial family themselves. He didn't seem to want to involve her in anything unless it was absolutely necessary—he hadn't told her about this ball, after all.

Rishe looked up at him. "Your Highness, may I select my maids some time over the next few days?"

"Very well. I'll tell Oliver to make that a priority."

"Ah, I can do the selection myself. We needn't trouble him."

Arnold arched an amused brow. Gone was that unsettling smile, replaced with his easy manner. "What are you planning this time?"

"Oh, nothing important," Rishe said. She picked up her empty glass. "I'm merely concerned about the servants' working conditions."

To protect her life and well-being, she needed to keep from dying at twenty years old again. And to do that, she had to prevent Arnold Hein's war. Her best bet would be to appeal to the important people she'd known in her past lives. People with influence.

Plus, there was a mountain of things she needed to do in preparation for the marriage ceremony.

I need to sow a plot of land, grow herbs, do lots of shopping, get cheap alcohol, and then...

Rishe began a to-do list that had nothing to do with war in the least.

As the ball wound to a close, a lone boy stood in the gloomy courtyard of the

imperial palace. He had soft black hair and round blue eyes. No older than sixteen, he had an androgynous grace to him, gaze fixed on the balcony above.

He was watching a girl.

She had coral-colored hair, and even from this distance, he could tell she was beautiful. She stood there alone, apparently waiting for someone. Whoever it was must have shown up because her hand slipped from the banister, and she stepped away. Not too long after, a man appeared where she had been standing.

The man turned a silent glare down into the garden, as if he'd known the boy had been there the whole time, despite the shadows.

A shiver ran down the boy's spine and he smiled reflexively, delighting in the intense aura of threat the man gave off. It was just a warning, it seemed, as the man abruptly turned on his heel and disappeared.

"Aww, we can't play together either?" The boy hung his head. "I miss you, Brother."

It had to be the woman. The beauty. She'd made the boy's life hell since the day she arrived.

His brother had prohibited him from attending balls like this one. That was fine; he'd sooner avoid them altogether. Still, he'd wanted to meet that girl.

"But we'll meet soon enough, won't we?" He spoke to himself in a soft voice. "I've got plans for you, Sister."

Chapter 3

“YOU’RE ALL SO USELESS!” Diana the redheaded maid’s voice rang out inside the stone washhouse.

Three days had passed since the afternoon Rishe shook off her guard and came out to the well. Rishe was once again dressed to fit in with the maids. At Diana’s shout, she looked up without pausing in her work.

“Is even laundry beyond your capabilities? I asked you to wash these this morning, and now it’s past noon! Meanwhile, we’ve finished cleaning the entire first floor in a third of the time!”

“I-I’m sorry, Diana.”

The new maids went silent with shame. Among them was Elsie, the girl Rishe stood up for the other day. Rishe pulled her hands out of the soapy water, gently rinsed them, and said, “Let me help. What still needs to be done?”

“You again?” Diana rounded on Rishe. “I don’t know who you serve, but I’m amazed you have the time to do other people’s work. I wish I had so much free time.”

Huffily, she turned from Rishe. “Let’s just ignore these useless fools. Laura, Maya. Come on. If we want to be chosen as Lady Rishe’s maids, we mustn’t waste our time.”

Diana took out a slip of paper from her pocket, smoothing it out. “It looks like the new bedsheets for her palace will arrive today. We should inspect them to make sure everything is perfect!”

“Wait up, Diana!”

The two maids followed Diana out. Rishe waited for the door to close before turning to Elsie and the others. “Let’s keep working. If there’s anything too large and cumbersome, feel free to pass it over to me.”

“Th-thank you so much!” The new maids went weak with gratitude. One of them, a girl on the verge of tears, even fell into a full bow. Rishe muttered encouragement as she scrubbed some bedsheets.

Elsie, who was washing the sheets with her, wore a rueful look. "I'm so sorry for the trouble. We're just not learning fast enough."

"You haven't been working here long, have you? It takes time to learn a new job, no matter who you are," Rishe said as she kept scrubbing. "And it's not like you've *never* washed a single thing in your life before, right?"

Elsie nodded nervously.

Rishe had realized over the past few days doing the laundry that not all the newcomers were complete amateurs. They'd obviously done chores at home, or something similar. When set a specific task, they could perform it properly, but Diana's complaints weren't unfounded. They did take far too much time with laundry.

But it's obvious why. "Do you know anything about Diana?" Rishe asked Elsie. "Like, is she from a well-off family?"

Elsie said, "I heard that her father was a business owner. She worked with him."

"I heard that as well," added another maid. "But he fell into debt and had to sell off."

Rishe stopped scrubbing for a moment to consider this.

"Um, is something the matter?" Elsie asked.

Rishe smiled and shook her head. "No, nothing. Let's just focus on getting these washed for the time being."

That afternoon, thirty maids were assembled in the detached wing of the palace. Ten of them were old hands, long in service to the royal family, while the other twenty were freshly hired. The crown princess was to choose her maids from among these thirty. They wore their nerves plainly on their sleeves.

"Hey, I thought this palace was in a terrible state of neglect," one maid whispered. "Why is it so sparkling clean?"

"Yeah, you're right," said another. "Someone must have sorted it out before we arrived."

“I wonder what kind of person Lady Rishe is. Ooh, I’m so nervous.”

The girls looked around anxiously.

“Hey, Elsie, that girl who was always helping us isn’t here.”

Elsie blinked. “You’re right.”

“Look, Diana. That impertinent newbie didn’t get picked.”

At her friend’s observation, Diana preened with satisfaction. “No surprise there. You need *some* manners to attend to Lady Rishe. I bet she got kicked out of the running!” Her eyes sparkled with confidence.

At last, there was a knock at the door.

“Her Royal Highness, Princess Rishe.”

The maids quickly fell into bows. Diana’s chest ached with anticipation as heels clicked on the floor, approaching the line of girls. From the corner of their eyes, the maids saw a wide-skirted court dress. A gentle scent washed over them.

Without even looking at her, they could tell Crown Princess Rishe was a lovely woman. Diana and her friends swelled with pride that she was to become their mistress.

But then Laura whispered to Diana, “Hey, isn’t this scent familiar?”

“Quiet!” Clearly it was some sort of expensive perfume. Or so Diana thought, but then she realized what it was. The words just slipped out. “It’s soap.”

“Huh? Did you just say something?”

“It’s soap. The same kind we always use.” Diana was sure of it.

The princess said, “Please rise.”

Why did her voice sound so familiar? An incredible foreboding gripping her, Diana looked up. She gasped.

“My name is Rishe Irmgard Weitzner.”

Before her stood the beautiful newcomer—the thorn in her side for the past few days. The smile she wore was peaceful and just the slightest bit satisfied.

I'm so glad I managed to finish washing the sheets in time!

Standing before the maids with Arnold's attendant Oliver at her side, Rishe was panicking on the inside. She'd had so much to do this morning that she'd put off the laundry to the last minute. She took deep, controlled breaths, praying no one would notice that she'd raced here at a dead sprint.

Oliver was none the wiser as he spoke to the assembled girls. Rishe took the opportunity to look them over. She locked eyes with Elsie, who was gaping at her. It was a nice change—usually her face was as blank as a rock wall.

I'm sorry for the deception. I figured blending in would give me the best picture of your working conditions.

The new maids wore similarly shocked expressions, while others watched her with delight. Meanwhile, the veterans, including Diana, had all gone pale. They trembled, stunned into silence. One seemed locked in a terrifying trance, while another looked on the verge of tears. All of them had spoken to Rishe with derision. As the ringleader, Diana was covering her mouth with both hands, like she was holding in a scream.

Oliver had finished his introduction. "Your Highness, if you would?"

Rishe stepped forward. "First, I must apologize to you for what has transpired prior to this meeting. My deception, that is. However, it has granted me insight into how each one of you works."

Oliver's face creased in confusion. The newcomer maids began to panic, whispering among themselves.

"Doesn't this mean that she helped us out with the laundry?"

"We're going to be fired!"

"If I lose my position, my brother will have to quit school!"

Noticing the commotion, Oliver glanced at Rishe. "Your Highness, two-thirds of these maids are newly recruited from the city. Since the majority of the castle maids were elderly, His Highness assumed you would prefer maids closer in age to yourself."

Rishe was startled. She *had* found it odd that most of her potential servants were new hires, but she hadn't expected this to be the reason.

"While the prince has entrusted the selection of your maids to you," Oliver went on. "Hiring someone with no experience will not do. Despite Prince Arnold's views, I urge you to reject the newcomers."

"Oliver."

"I have a list of their names here. Elsie—"

"Elsie, Nichole, Hilde, Marguerite, Rosa." Rishe began listing the names of the newly recruited maids. She'd made a point to memorize them in the washhouse. "Elke, Amelia, and—"

Oliver looked at her wildly. "You know them all?! Even though they've never served you in the past?"

"Yes, of course I do. Servants are essential to the maintenance of our lifestyle, why wouldn't I get to know them?" Rishe listed the remaining names for good measure. "All twenty of you, listen to me."

The new maids stiffened. Diana and the other maids whose names hadn't been called were getting their wind back, wearing increasingly triumphant looks.

Rishe said, "The twenty names I just called will be my maids."

Time seemed to stand still a moment, and then Oliver broke in with an astonished, "B-but, my lady! They are all inexperienced—"

"Yes. And my palace will be the perfect place to learn."

The new recruits were completely speechless, unsure of exactly what was happening.

Rishe smiled at Elsie. "I hope you'll serve me well, Elsie."

Elsie was still frozen in place. "Huh? Y-yes, my lady, but—"

A shaking Diana cried out, "But why, my lady?! You've seen their work! They're useless, the lot of them! The rest of us get so much more done in a shorter amount of time!"

“Watch your tongue, girl,” Oliver said sharply.

Diana ignored him. “We’re hard workers! Any job you assign us, we can do it! Please, I beg you, my lady!”

“Step back,” Oliver warned. “Do not take a single step closer to Lady Rishe.”

Diana spoke in a rush, words pouring out of her. “I-I freely admit that I was impolite before, but I didn’t know who she was! I’ll take any punishment, so please, give me the chance to show you how well I can work!”

Rishe said, “Diana, I have a request.”

“Th-thank you, my lady!” Diana heaved a sigh of relief. “You mean you’ll—”

Rishe cut across her. “As of today, you are no longer a maid in this palace.”

“What?” Her face, usually so fixed with determination, paled. “But why? I’m so much better than any of them! I’ll do a perfect job no matter what task you set before me. Please don’t dismiss me, my lady!”

“Listen to me, Diana.” Rishe dropped her lofty tone, speaking as one woman would to another. “You have noticed it, haven’t you? No matter what you claim, these new girls aren’t worthless.”

“I...I don’t understand.”

“Can you remember your first month in service? How difficult it was?”

Diana looked completely bewildered. Her gaze darted around as if looking for help.

Pulling herself together, she forced herself to follow Rishe’s directions. She thought back and finally alighted on a response. “I...I didn’t know how to do the job. Before, when my family was still prominent, I’d washed shirts and bedsheets. Never gowns or military uniforms.”

“Perfectly reasonable,” Rishe said. “Only natural for someone just starting out.”

“The older girls were so busy, they told me to just watch them since they didn’t have time to teach me. When I had questions...well, there was nobody to ask.”

“I bet. And did you have any other problems?”

“Well, yes. There was a lot to learn. Different kinds of soap and washboards depending on the cloth. You use different tools for different materials. I had to learn how they worked and how to put them away. I was...punished if I didn’t get it right the first time.”

The newcomers were exchanging surprised looks. Rishe understood why.

Everything Diana said was familiar to them. They spent valuable time searching for their materials and the proper ways to use them, but they shrank from asking for help. Everyone always looked so busy. This was a universal problem.

“Despite all that, I got better!” Diana protested. “I only needed to be taught once. Unlike them! They’re useless!”

“Yes, well. There’s a difference between you and them,” Rishe told Diana. “You can read and write.”

“Oh!” Diana started in surprise. Elsie looked at the floor.

The literacy rate among commoners was low no matter where you went. Very few families had the means to afford an education, especially for daughters. Diana had been born to a merchant’s family—she’d received formal schooling. The maids she was close friends with were likely from similar backgrounds. The majority of those in service were not so fortunate.

“What if you only received instructions on how to do a job once and weren’t able to write it down to remind yourself later?” Rishe asked. “Would you be so confident?”

“I-I don’t—” Diana reflexively thrust a hand into her apron pocket, where she had a list of daily tasks recorded in her neat handwriting to reference throughout the day. Hopefully now she would understand how much of an edge her privileged literacy gave her over the other maids.

“Everyone else works as hard as they can, just like you do,” Rishe said. “Remember how it was for you at first? They all have to start somewhere. I hope you’ll keep that in mind.”

“They’re no different from me,” Diana mumbled begrudgingly, glancing around the room, looking at the less experienced maids. As if coming to a decision, she said, “I’m sorry.”

“Diana?”

Like a child enumerating her regrets, Diana went on, “I’ve done you wrong, all of you. It’s just, I had nothing. Or so it felt like. No money, no title. I thought I had to make my way in the world on my own. That I had to start from zero.” Her shoulders trembled as she buried her face in her hands. “But I was wrong! I wasn’t starting from zero. I had everything that I learned growing up. I didn’t realize how fortunate I was. I let it all go to my head.” Her voice rose to a wail. “How could I have said all of those terrible things?! Even though you were all working so hard—trying your best even while feeling as helpless as I did all those years ago. I should have understood what you were going through. A-and I failed you.”

“Oh, Diana...”

“I’m sorry,” Diana sobbed. “I’m so, so sorry.”

The new maids stared at her, stunned. But then they clustered around her.

“It’s okay, Diana. We’re sorry for not being faster learners.”

“My lady, please reconsider! Diana scared us, but she’s always flawless with her work. And that goes for the other maids with more experience than us too.”

“It’s fine.” Diana scrubbed at her eyes. “It makes sense she wants nothing to do with us. Don’t beg—”

“Diana.” Rishe smiled and held out her hand. “Didn’t I say that I had a request?”

“Huh?”

“I don’t want you as a maid. I want you as an instructor.”

A murmur rose among the maids. Even Oliver looked surprised.

“I want the inexperienced maids to come to this palace to learn. And not just by observation alone—with thorough demonstrations and explanations. Come up with a system to allow girls to ask their questions, to perform the tasks again

and again until they learn them. And once they have all they need, they'll be promoted to work in the main palace for the royal family."

Rishe recognized these problems—they were rampant the world over. Those with work didn't have the time to train those who were new to the same work, rendering the amateurs stranded at sea, forced to learn on their own or quit before they even had a chance. If only someone had sat them down to teach them what they needed to know. When you learned from observation rather than foundational skills, mistakes were more far more likely.

If the palace couldn't afford the staff or the time to train its servants properly, Rishe would take it upon herself.

"You can't lose a skill once you've acquired it, whether that be reading and writing, how to do a job, or how to *teach* a job. Knowledge is a weapon you can wield wherever you go, not just here. You can apply your new skills elsewhere—wherever you want."

The maids listened to Rishe, wonder in their eyes.

"That's why I'll be taking the twenty newcomers as my maids. Diana, you and your friends shall teach them. You'll be their tutors."

"Their tutors, my lady?"

"I would like all my maids to be able to read and write. One hour of study a day should be sufficient. You and your friends will be their teachers. I expect you to come up with materials for them as well as a handbook for new maids."

Diana was utterly stunned. "You want us to teach reading and writing? And... and write a book?"

She could never have imagined this sort of opportunity. Rishe drew something from her breast pocket. It was one of Diana's pages of notes. "I took a look at this."

"Where did you get that?"

Rishe ignored the question. She didn't want to say she'd specifically joined the maids this morning to swipe it. "Your handwriting is neat, and your steps are logical and succinct. You have a gift for transcription. I believe you'll make

an excellent teacher.”

Diana’s cheeks flushed. “You would praise me so? After all of those rude things I said to you?”

“Hah! I have no idea what you mean.”

Diana bit her lip and took Rishe’s outstretched hand, then bowed deeply. “I will do my utmost to live up to your faith in me. Thank you.”

“Excellent.” Rishe turned to Elsie and the other new maids. “As for the rest of you, you’ll have your hands full with your new duties. Let me know if you have any problems or find the workload too taxing.”

“Yes, my lady!”

And thus came about the formation of Lady Rishe’s School for Wayward Maids.

Upon his return to the main palace, Oliver made straight for his master’s office.

Arnold was sitting at his desk. Without looking up, he asked, “Has Rishe decided on her maids?”

“About that...” Oliver hesitated. “Were you aware we had a retention problem? Our turnover is so high, we’re chronically understaffed.”

“Yes. We raised their wages, if I recall.” He tapped his pen to his mouth. “I think it’s been better than it was.”

“Well, Lady Rishe may have fixed it altogether.”

Arnold raised his head.

“She’s picked out literate women and asked them to draft teaching materials. She declared a brand-new system for training maids.” He gave a little amazed shake of the head. “On top of that, she managed to endear every one of those girls to her, while at the same time figuring out exactly how each one could be best utilized.”

Silence.

“The maids are all excited to begin. There’s always been a huge social divide between old and new workers, but Rishe dispensed with it. They’re allies now.”

“I see.” Arnold’s mouth twitched, and he went back to writing.

“Did you predict this, Your Highness? You don’t seem very surprised.”

Arnold snorted. “How could I predict something like this? Well, I knew she would do *something* odd.”

“Using your future wife’s eccentricities as entertainment is unbecoming, you know,” Oliver chided. Then he grinned. “I honestly can’t wait to see what she’ll do next.”

“Oliver.” Arnold cast his eyes down, voice dropping as he said, “I did not choose Rishe for the benefit of the country or for my family.”

Oliver paused. “My apologies, Your Highness.” He then sat down to see what work needed to be done.

Flower petals danced in the wind. Dressed in a linen gown, Rishe hacked away at the soil with a hand hoe. “Take that!”

She’d spent the last few days tilling her future garden, a small corner of a courtyard granted to her by Arnold at her request.

This should be enough space for the meantime. Rishe surveyed her tilled land with satisfaction. Buckets of mulch sat nearby, fertile soil she’d collected from a deciduous tree in the garden.

With an enormous heave, she picked up a bucket and began scattering soil over the tilled ground. By the time she was finished, her arms were numb.

I need to start working out.

This body had belonged to a sedentary noblewoman until recently, with no muscle density or stamina to speak of. She found it far inferior to the forms she’d cultivated as a knight or an apothecary tending her garden. Her mind knew the motions, but her conditioning couldn’t stand up to it.

Still, she wanted to get more work done before her aching body forced her to

pack it in. Taking a break from the bucket, she began hacking away with her hoe, aerating the soil by mixing it together with the mulch. She took care to remove any roots she came across, but she wasn't as thorough as she could have been. She was curious to see what unfamiliar flowers might bud between her rows of plants.

Her knights, standing guard a little ways away, watched Rishe curiously. Diana soon joined them, her eyes going round as saucers. "My lady, what are you doing?"

"Oh, this? I'm tilling a field."

"A field? But you're the future empress!"

When Rishe finished mixing the dirt, she formed the soil into soft ridges. It was ready for planting, but Rishe decided it would be best to let it sit and acclimate to the sunlight for the time being. She wiped the sweat from her brow, grinning at the flabbergasted Diana. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Are you ready to show me what you've come up with?"

"Oh, yes!" Diana nervously presented Rishe the document. The paper had neat lines of handwriting and charming little doodles of brooms and dust cloths. "I was thinking that the first words the newcomers should learn how to read are the words for cleaning equipment."

Diana was still clad in the maids' dress, though she had removed her apron. She plucked at her skirts anxiously. "These are words they use daily in their work," she added. "I thought it would be helpful."

"Good thinking," Rishe said. "I agree."

Diana's expression momentarily brightened before fading back into gloom. Maybe she didn't feel as confident as she'd first appeared. "To be honest...I wonder if they wouldn't be happier learning how to read and write their own names first."

"True. It's certainly good to consider the likes and dislikes of your students."

Rishe recalled the life she'd spent as a maid and the son of the manor who had been taught to read by a private tutor. He'd practice with such concentration and then run over to show her.

Tapping her chin, she said, “But with the names...they wouldn’t be able to review together, nor could they help each other out if someone forgets. And you’d have to teach them one by one instead of all together—does that make sense?”

“Yes, I see.” Diana breathed a sigh of relief.

“I think teaching them how to read and write the words that they can immediately use for work is a wonderful idea. I’d be thrilled if I were your student.”

“You’re too kind.” Diana glowed, hugging the paper to herself. “I actually quite enjoy this work, my lady. It’s even more fun than coming up with insults.”

Rishe laughed. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“But if you don’t mind me asking, my lady... Why bother with this? Why are you offering us so much help?”

“Well...”

Rishe hesitated long enough that they were interrupted by Elsie, who sidled up meekly.

“My lady, it’s about time to get ready.”

Rishe nodded. “Excuse me, Diana. I have an appointment. Keep up the good work!”

“Of course!”

“Oh, Diana!” Elsie smiled shyly. “Can we do another review after dinner tonight?”

Diana lit up. “Of course! Make sure you’re prepared because none of you are going to bed until you get every answer right!”

Elsie giggled, waving as she and Rishe returned to the detached wing. “The bath is ready, my lady.”

“Perfect. I need to wash off all of this sweat and dirt. I’ll need to wash my hair too. Elsie, will you lay out my finest gown and help me with my hair?” Rishe almost skipped in excitement at who she was going to see afterward.

Elsie trotted behind her, puzzled. “I heard that gentleman is a merchant. Do you really need to wear your best gown?”

“Hmm, I guess you have a point. But trust me on this, it’ll all work out.”

“Oh...?”

The Aria Trading Company’s guild master, a man named Tully, was due to arrive in a few hours.

This was the merchant company that had given Rishe a helping hand in her very first life. Everything she learned about commerce, she learned from Tully. The value of goods, strategies for judging a trading partner. He taught her to spend money to make more of it, warning her against get-rich-quick schemes. Rishe owed her apprenticeship to Tully, without a doubt.

With the Aria Trading Company on her side, Rishe would greatly expand her pool of allies. They could assist her if she needed a quick escape from Galkhein, fleeing divorce or banishment. They could shore up a supply route for a war. Or course, Rishe had to make it worth their while.

If I can make this deal, we’ll have a connection. Now, how do I snag Tully on my hook? Rishe climbed out of the bath, pondering the question as she dried off and put on her fanciest gown. *It’s early enough in the timeline that they haven’t been long established; any ordinary company would be champing at the bit to nab an imperial wedding. But with Tully I’m not so sure.*

Rishe ruminated on this as Elsie did her hair. When at last she was ready, she blinked her way out of her fugue and looked in the mirror. Her hair was done in soft curls, her gown a stunning blood red. This time she *did* wear jewelry—lots of it—and carried a feathered fan.

Hmm... Hard to decide what vibe to go for. A tasteless, gaudy spendthrift, and therefore an easy mark? Or a noblewoman so high in the instep she’ll spare no expense?

Elsie looked at her dubiously. “My lady, I tried my best to put your hair up to match the dress, with a few loose pieces to complete the look, but...” She trailed off. Elsie was exceptional at picking outfits and coordinating styles—she’d been dressing her own little sisters for years.

Rishe squared her shoulders. If she was scaring her own lady's maid, that must mean her ploy was working. "I appreciate it, Elsie. But today I'm dressed for battle."

Leaving her baffled maid behind, Rishe went to meet the Aria Trading Company. Escorted by two guards, she made her way to the main palace. Her own villa was not yet equipped with a suitable receiving room for guests. The footman bowed her into the parlor, allowing the guards to step inside first to ensure the room was secure.

A handsome, brown-skinned man stood waiting for her. "Your Highness, I am Kaine Tully, chairman of the Aria Trading Company." He smiled amiably and bowed. "May I congratulate you on your upcoming wedding?"

Tully had combed back his famously unkempt hair and shaved far closer than she'd ever seen him bother. He also did not appear to be hungover, which made for an equally large change.

"Rishe Irmgard Weitzner. I appreciate you taking the time; I imagine it was a journey of some distance. Please, sit."

He thanked her and sat. Rishe lowered herself into her own chair with great dignity. She felt him gauging her, watching her with the dark, hooded eyes that tavern girls across the continent swooned over.

It feels like he can see through me with a single glance. And I wouldn't expect anything less.

Not that he was ogling; his gaze was perfectly correct. But he'd been watching her since she came in.

"I say, this is a lovely time of year, isn't it?" Tully began. "I believe your wedding is planned for halfway through the eighth month, is that right? A summer bride. How marvelous!" Tully grinned. "The citizens of Galkhein must be overjoyed to have such a lovely woman as their future empress."

"You flatter me." Rishe smiled at the empty compliments, mind fixed on the past.

"Mwa ha ha! I knew he wouldn't know a fake sapphire when he saw one. Idiot! We took bets on whether you could dupe that intermediary, and I had my

money on you, Rishe. Thanks for helping me fleece my birdbrained staff."

"Rishe! Here's your final examination. We took a loss of five million in gold due to negligence. Not yours, someone else's, but you are the one who's going to make it back. Oh, and by the way, you've got one week, so get cracking."

"Please, Rishe, I'm begging you! Tell Aria that woman I had over last night was just a friend!"

She had a faraway look in her eyes. That was fine. Let Tully think she was dreaming of her bright future.

"The white of a wedding dress will complement your features, if I might be so bold. Perhaps a gown of layered silk?" With that, Tully smoothly shifted from small talk to business. Rishe was relieved to have passed his assessment.

"That sounds superb, Mr. Tully. As I'm sure you've been told, I wish to engage the Aria Trading Company to assist me in assembling everything we will need for the ceremony. I've heard great things about you."

"Have you? How kind."

"To cut to the chase, have you brought anything to show me today? I'd love to see my options."

The messenger had been instructed to tell them Rishe was considering their company for everything. She imagined Tully had brought a whole legion of carts weighed down with fripperies to sell her.

If I make this deal, we'll have an established connection. I just need to close this.

"Unfortunately, I cannot sell to you, my lady." At this, Rishe froze. Tully shrugged, his smile still in place. "Or rather, I *will not* sell to you."

"What? Why?" The Aria Trading Company was essential for her future plans. She needed them.

Over the next few years, Tully would expand his personal connections and trade routes. He would be a main supplier of future inventions. His company would grow to a global scale. Without them, Rishe's easy link to the levers of power in every nation evaporated.

Tully continued to smile at her blandly, “My lady, quite frankly, your insistence doesn’t match my offerings.”

“My insistence?”

“You appear ready to stake your life on this deal. Am I wrong?”

Rishe nearly lost her composure then. With a huge effort, she willed her expression into one of polite confusion. His deep, long-lashed eyes were openly searching her now. It seemed they were past pretense.

“Let’s speak plainly, my lady,” Tully said. “We’re discussing wedding preparations. I know that for a crown princess, your wedding will be your crowning jewel. However...” His eyes narrowed. “You have the look of a woman staring down death. Whatever you’re after, it isn’t a flawless marriage ceremony or a well-heeled soirée. And I don’t like complications.”

With a gasp, Rishe remembered something Tully had said to her a long time ago: “Become an easy choice for the customer. Offer them goods and value they won’t find anywhere else. And once you’re established, you pick the customers.”

Tully already had reliable trade. He wouldn’t risk a deal with an unknown entity who might incur losses down the line, no matter how high-ranking they were. Rishe had been thoroughly screened out of Tully’s customer base.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.” Rishe took care not to betray any dismay. “I’m sorry if I appeared overeager. I don’t have any event-planning experience.”

Tully let out a good-natured laugh. “You have nothing to worry about. I’m sure you’ll find the perfect business partner. Unfortunately, my company will not be it.” Tully stood up and executed a bow so elegant she knew it was meant to mock her. “It was an honor to be invited to speak with you. Now, if you’d please excuse me.”

“Mr. Tully—”

“Galkhein is a lovely country.” Tully cut her off roundly. “I believe we may spend a few days here to relax and take in the sights. One of your attendants even steered us to a suitable inn.”

“Please, wait. Let us discuss things a bit—”

“Farewell, my lovely future majesty.”

Tully left before Rishe could mount a protest.

I had no chance back there, Rishe thought, idly sipping a cup of tea. She'd shed the ridiculous jewels and changed into a plain, serviceable gown that was easier to move in. She was sitting in her parlor in the detached wing with a plate of fresh-baked cookies in front of her, but she couldn't even summon up the energy to try one.

I admit, I was nervous, but I thought I maintained my composure well enough. Yet he still saw through me. I lost that round, no doubt about it.

The truth was, she'd never beaten Tully. Not even in her subsequent lives, when she knew what to expect.

Around her, her maids chattered among themselves.

“He finally proposed!”

“Wow, I'm so happy for you!”

The girls had finished their studies for the day, and they too were clustered around drinking tea. On most days, Rishe would join in. Today she barely heard them.

“Aww, I hope I meet a man that wonderful someday!”

Maybe he was simply being cautious? He doesn't jump into deals that look too good to be true. Still, did he really read the desperation in my face? He's a gambler at heart. This isn't like him.

After much thinking, she only had one conclusion: *He didn't choose me, and that's a fact.*

Rishe sat in quiet dejection. Without the trading company's connections, she couldn't appeal to powerful people, and she couldn't prevent the war. Without that, her happy life wouldn't last. And as loath as she was to admit it...Rishe hated being met with Tully's disapproval. She'd wanted to take her old boss for

everything he had.

Also, something he said was still bothering her. *That couldn't have been an accident...could it?*

"Speaking of weddings, what about you, my lady?" one of the maids cried. "How did His Highness propose to you?"

"Oh, I've been wondering too!" chirped another. "All the girls in the city are dying to know!"

He said specifically that he'd be staying in Galkhein over the next couple of days. He even told me how to find the name of the inn.

"My lady?"

The maids gave her concerned looks as Rishe began to smile. "I'm so sorry. I'm feeling a bit indisposed. I think I'll retire for the night."

The maids all chimed in with concern. Rishe waved them off.

"No need. I'll join you for tea another day. I won't require dinner this evening either."

"As you wish, my lady. We'll be sure to let you rest."

"And we'll have plenty of tea ready tomorrow morning!"

Rishe thanked the girls for their understanding, then went to her chambers and locked the door. In her hands were a few packets of herbs.

"You're in fine form tonight, sir."

Kaine Tully strode down the streets of Galkhein's capital, flanked by his employees, who commended him on his festive enjoyment of the local spirits.

He was in a good mood, his shirt half-unbuttoned, nearly humming with pleasure as he said, "Galkhein has wonderful liquor. We should buy up the whole store to sell up north."

"Why would we do that, sir? You'd just drink our profits down before we even got them in the wagons!"

“Yes, yes, hilarious. Not wrong, though.” He laughed with his men as they made their way back to the inn. He’d have preferred to bring a woman or two back with him, but he had his reasons. “Say, I’m still thirsty. Another round? I’m sure the tavern floor can pull a decent pint.” Indeed, raucous voices floated from the taproom. The mood seemed to be good tonight.

“Sir, I’ve been thinking...” One of his employees was so drunk he could barely stand. “That was the Galkhein crown princess! I can’t believe you just blew her off!”

“Working with royals is bad business, you dolt. Believe me, I know.”

“Isn’t she fifteen? What did she do to you?”

Tully snorted, swinging open the door to the inn. “Listen, that *little girl* is—”

“Welcome back, Mr. Tully.”

That voice sobered him instantly. Tully forced a stiff smile. Sitting poised at a table was Lady Rishe, the future crown princess.

“Thank you for your invitation,” Rishe purred. “So very kind of you.”

It took a lot to surprise Tully, but the sight in front of him caught him completely off guard. He’d predicted she would come, but not so soon. He thought she’d disguise herself, but he truthfully had not anticipated the mousy brown of freshly dyed hair.

No, that wasn’t what surprised him. What drew him up short was the score of unconscious men seated around her, half-full mugs still gripped in their hands.



“Would you care to join me for a drink, Mr. Tully?”

Tully had to clear his throat several times before he managed to ask, “What happened to those guys?”

“Oh, we bet on who could hold their liquor, and they lost.” Rishe grinned and tilted her glass. “Don’t worry, I’m not here for drinking games. I was hoping we could continue our discussion.”

The inn Rishe sat in was near the imperial palace. She’d asked the innkeeper to clear out everyone who’d passed out. The onlookers of the drinking game were gathered around excitedly.

“Ya sure can hold your liquor, missy! I couldn’t challenge ya since I don’t drink, but lemme treat you anyway for putting on such a good show.”

“Why, thank you,” Rishe said.

“Here, try this! The chicken with melted cheese goes great paired with wine.”

“This is delicious!” Rishe said. “Thank you.”

Rishe looked with satisfaction at the food and drink piled on the table. She wished she could relish her victory, but her adversary sat across from her, watching her coolly.

When their eyes met, Tully offered a crooked smile. “Well, I certainly wouldn’t have anticipated that you’d drink my men under the table while you waited. What a fool I was.”

“Oh, they were your employees?” Rishe asked, her voice airy. “We were having *such* a good time, though I admit we got rather carried away.”

Naturally, Rishe knew who they were. During her time working with the Aria Trading Company, Rishe had beaten all of her coworkers at a drinking game at their very first banquet. The ones she’d competed against tonight were the very same people.

Tully wore the same look then too.

Rishe had been brought up at court—she had a high tolerance for spirits.

“Drink?”

Tully accepted the glass she pushed toward him, eyeing her. “You did a fair job with your hair.”

“Thank you. The color does stand out—I figured this would be easiest.” She’d dyed her hair chestnut brown with the herbs the knights picked on their journey to Galkhein. It would wash out easily with hot water—very useful for temporary disguises. “I’ll trade the recipe for the chance to do business.”

Tully laughed. “Nice try.” He leaned forward on his elbows, eyes glinting. “You can do better than that. And I suspect you will.”

Rishe let that wash over her. His surety made her nervous. What did he know?

“Shall we open negotiations, my lady? First, a toast.”

“Please address me as you would anyone, the disguise is worthless if you keep ‘my lady-ing’ me. Besides...” A pause. “Hearing it from you is odd.”

Tully gave her a quizzical look. “Well, okay. If that’s what you’d prefer.” He raised his mug, and Rishe clinked hers against it. Tully drained half of his in one go, letting out a long breath.

“Just ‘miss,’ then. Anyway, stop with the charade. I know this isn’t about a dress.”

“Yes, tricks don’t work on you, it seems.”

“Glad that’s been established.” Tully drained the rest of his drink. “My instincts tell me you aren’t a customer. You’re a potential partner.”

So he *had* lured her out here. Once again, Rishe felt how truly out of her depth she was. But she had no choice but to get him on her side. He had once been her boss and her ally, but now things were different.

“Tell me every little detail about whatever moneymaking scheme you’ve concocted.”

“Mr. Tully.”

“I’m not agreeing to anything until I know exactly what you’re doing. Despite

how I look, I'm very good at my job. Whatever you hope to bring in, I can double it."

"Mr. Tully."

"I'll come up with the perfect strategy. Now, tell me—"

"I cannot."

He gave her a sharp look. "What?"

"I cannot disclose my plan. Nevertheless, I want to be able to depend on the Aria Trading Company when the time comes."

His mouth twisted into a grin. "That's quite a bold ask, miss. You want a handshake deal based on...what? Promises and starshine? I don't do that sort of business."

"You'll be well compensated, of course."

"You're expecting me to go in with you for the *potential* of profit?"

Rishe wished she could blurt everything out—tell him that in the next few years, her husband-to-be would kill his father and throw the world into turmoil. Obviously, she held her tongue.

"Listen, miss. When I decide whether to go into business with a person, I mostly go off my instincts. But I also emphasize—"

"Previous results and track record, correct?"

Tully looked stunned. She had completely caught him off guard. "How do you...?"

"I'll sell something in the city. If it is well received, and you judge me worthy of your time, can we talk?"

Tully stared at Rishe a moment before he burst out laughing. "Oh, go on. A gamble? Now *that's* how I like to do things!"

Believe me, I know. Next you'll tell me to hit a profit goal in a specified time frame.

"You've got one week. I look forward to seeing what you come up with, miss."

Rishe smiled, emptied her glass, and then stood up. “We have an agreement, then. Thank you for your time. Ah, and when your people wake tomorrow, give them this.”

Tully held up one of the little packets of herbs. “Oh? What’s this?”

“They’ll find out,” Rishe said and made her exit.

Rishe returned to her balcony with the rope of bedsheets left dangling in the courtyard, pulling herself up hand over hand. The inn was only ten minutes from the palace, but sneaking out had been an ordeal. She moved quietly across stonework to conceal her footsteps from the guards posted at her door.

It seems I wasn’t missed. In the morning, I’ll have to hide beneath the bed curtains until Elsie brings me hot water. I’ve got to get my hair color back to normal before anyone starts asking questions.

Rishe pushed open the glass door to her chambers. She gasped.

Arnold sat in the room’s only chair, legs crossed. “You’re out late.”

“What are you doing here?”

Rishe hadn’t seen him since the party a few nights ago. He didn’t yet have his own chambers in their detached palace, and she’d heard he was still laboring under a mountain of work. As far as Rishe knew, he’d only been here once. Why did his second visit have to be the night she snuck out?

“You met with the merchant from the Aria Trading Company today, no?” Arnold asked. He stared at her with his chin propped on his fist, as usual.

The lamp by the bedside flickered, flames guttering. The chamber was too dim to read his expression.

“I was waiting to know what you intended to buy, but I didn’t hear from you all day. I asked your guards for a report, and they told me the merchant declined your contract.” Arnold stood and took a single step toward her. “A curious thing for him to refuse a future empress.”

Sensing danger, Rishe reflexively took a step back, despite knowing there was nothing behind her but the wall. A few steps more and she’d be cornered.

“When you singled out the Aria Trading Company, I figured you already had a relationship with them. My fiancée doesn’t seem the sort of woman to choose business partners recklessly, after all.”

Arnold’s high buttoned collar was undone, loose enough to reveal his collarbones. One might expect that to make him look vulnerable, but on the contrary. The moonlight glittered on his scarred neck and marble-like features. He looked amused on the surface, but something savage stalked in his eyes. Rishe thought again of a wolf.

“I was curious. I took a break to see you, but even from outside I could tell your chambers were vacant.”

When Arnold killed her, they’d stood at about this distance. Was that the past? The future? Regardless, her heart sped up. Tension winched the space between her shoulders tight.

The aura of threat was different this time, though. Rishe couldn’t have given it a name.

“I *did* tell you to live however you like. Getting angry would be illogical. I dismissed your guards and decided to patiently await your return.”

“Your Highness—”

“How interesting.” Arnold pressed his hands to the wall, trapping Rishe between his arms. He grinned wolfishly. “I suppose even a woman like you fears a man late at night, alone in her chamber.”

Rishe sucked in a breath, stunned by the comment. Then she realized she was angry at herself, not at him. She shouldn’t have let him read the fear in her eyes. Besides, she’d made a tactical error.

“I’m sorry,” she said from the heart.

The twisted grin slid off Arnold’s face. He looked down at her in silence.

“I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t consider how having your fiancée creeping around town at night could damage your reputation.”

Rishe’s mistakes had always been her own to bear. But this was different. Even if she really *had* been a hostage, with this whole charade just for form’s

sake, she'd forgotten she was about to become someone's wife. She was willing to shoulder a scandal should she be found out, but that wasn't her choice to make.

Arnold said, "That's not why I'm upset."

Rishe had been avoiding his gaze, but this startled her into looking back at him.

"I doubt anyone in the city would recognize you. They've only seen you once, and from inside a coach at that. And you dyed your hair too. It would be one thing if I actually believed you meant to cuckold me, but I imagine you went out to negotiate with the Aria Trading Company."

"You're too kind, Your Highness."

Arnold frowned. "Anyway, that isn't what occupies my mind so."

"What, then, Your Highness?"

"Are you hurt?"

The question took her by surprise. Why would he ask that? "No, I'm fine."

"You didn't get mixed up in a crime, did you?"

Rishe started. "No!"

Arnold released his breath. "Next time you want to creep out under cover of night, take me with you. Understand?"

"Wait, are you serious?"

Arnold removed his hands from the wall, releasing Rishe. "Don't you remember what I said? Once we're married, you can do whatever you want. And I'll help you do it."

Rishe shook her head. "I couldn't possibly hold you to my whims. Don't worry, I'll be more prudent from now on."

"I said you could do as you pleased, but I don't want you endangering yourself."

"Oh?" Rishe's voice came out a little hoarse. "You pamper me too much." She wasn't sure what to make of this because she had no idea why he was doing it.

“I know you well enough already to be confident that if I confine you to the palace grounds, you’ll take it as a challenge.” Arnold sat back down, his usual calm smile returning. “I realize that if I don’t want you to blow away on the wind, I’ll need to attach some strings.”

Rishe felt the strength suddenly go out of her. She sat down on the edge of the bed. “Am I that predictable?”

“On the contrary, I can’t predict you at all.”

“You both love this, don’t you? You and Mr. Tully.” Rishe clenched a fist, annoyed beyond belief that she’d been seen through by not one but *two* men in the same day.

As usual, I can’t guess at his motives. But for Arnold Hein to let me run roughshod over his name and reputation, there must be something. She needed to take better advantage of his lax oversight, yet she couldn’t prevent stirrings of guilt. She wanted to prevent a war, but she didn’t want to do it at the cost of being a bad wife.

But if Arnold responded to her willfulness by offering her *more* privileges and not less, well, that was his own affair.

“Mr. Tully, was that his name?” Arnold went on. “Tell me, what happened between you and the Aria Trading Company?”

Rishe felt the exhaustion burning through her limbs. “Your Highness, may I ask you something completely unrelated to this discussion?”

“Yes?”

“...Are you hungry?”

Arnold blinked at her, nonplussed.

Rishe stood in the small kitchen of the palace, chopping herbs the knights had brought her from their morning patrol of the city’s perimeter. She made short work of it, gathering the herbs on the cutting board and scraping them into the pot along with onions and bacon and other delights. She left it to simmer, the aroma filling the kitchen.

It was a small space, only ever used for making breakfast, and therefore completely deserted at night.

“Umm...” Rishe glanced over her shoulder. “Are you sure you don’t want to wait back in my chambers?”

Arnold sat on a wooden chair in the corner, leaning against the bare table beside him with his head in his hand as he watched Rishe make the soup. “No, I’m fine here.”

“If you say so.” This couldn’t be exciting, could it? He’d also just sat there watching as she attacked her dyed hair with hot water and a towel.

Maybe he just likes people-watching, she thought as she stirred the soup. Sensing it was done, she scooped some out into a small dish and tried it.

After a moment of silence, she added salt.

She stirred it again and tasted it. She squeezed her eyes shut, poured in some water, adding pepper once it was boiling. Then some more chopped herbs, just in case, before trying it again. The taste brought her quickly to her senses.

What have I done?!

Regret welled inside her. What a terrible decision, made purely out of exhaustion—inviting the crown prince to a kitchen so late and then *making him soup*.

“Um, Your Highness?” Rishe passed the bowl of soup from hand to hand. “I’m going to apologize in advance.”

“Advance of what? Wandering around the city again in the middle of the night?”

“Well, yes, I’ll apologize for that as well. Just...I should have thought this through, so I feel really bad about it, but...” She took a deep breath to ready herself for the admission.

Admitting weakness to a former enemy was difficult, not to mention embarrassing. Indeed, she was only doing it to prevent greater misfortune down the road. She struggled to find the right words. Finally, she managed to look Arnold in the eye and let out a strangled, “I-I’m bad at cooking!”

“Oh?” A fleeting look passed over his face, one Rishe had never seen before. It was gone too fast for her to divine its meaning. “Is that so?”

“I invited you here out of hunger and exhaustion, and I’ve made a huge mess of things. I shouldn’t have offered. I’m so sorry.”

“Well, I admit I was a bit confused,” Arnold said. “I don’t know any noblewomen who can cook.”

“Fair enough...” Rishe trailed off.

In her previous lives, she ate primarily to keep herself alive. She *preferred* food that tasted good, of course, but she’d take time to sleep over the time spent preparing a good meal. In her last life as a knight, she would at most boil a potato and add some salt. Easy.

From her time as an apothecary, Rishe knew that brewing medicines and cooking weren’t that different—you just added the right ingredients in the right quantities, chopping and boiling in a pot rather than a beaker. On the other hand, cooking *was* intrinsically different—you wanted it to actually taste good, and to do that, you needed to understand how to marry the flavors involved and the methods by which to enhance them.

She wouldn’t have cared if she were the only one eating this soup. She had gone this far with making this meal, but she felt too ashamed to feed it to Arnold as well. “It took so long, and now it won’t be good.”

Arnold said nothing.

“I’ll go fetch you something more edible from the main kitchens, just hold on a bit longer. Then we can talk about the Aria—”

Before she could finish, Arnold stood up, grabbed the dish from Rishe, and tasted the soup all in one smooth motion.

“Hey!” Rishe’s surprise momentarily delayed her reaction speed.

Ignoring her dismay, Arnold said, “This is actually pretty good.”

She gawked at him. “What?!”

Arnold finished off the rest of the dish. “I’m fine with soup.”

“You’re lying! I don’t believe you!” Rishe tried the soup again. It was just... bad. Certainly not worthy of praise, and *definitely* not something to serve a prince—or anyone else for that matter.

Why would he pretend to like it?

A memory popped into her head. Arnold, standing on the balcony and drinking the capsicum-tainted wine. It was just spicy but still not very drinkable.

Is there something wrong with his taste buds?

“Hey, you’re thinking something unflattering about me.” He pouted. “I can tell.”

Rishe, with a rush of fresh embarrassment, realized that Arnold was trying to be kind. She floundered for a beat.

“Thank you,” she said, rather nonsensically.

“You have me starving. Let’s get the dishes out.”

Moving automatically, Rishe quickly set the table. After that, there was nothing to do but dine on the...*unique* soup.

Typically, Rishe spent her meals alone. She’d never eaten with Arnold before, even during their journey. He was always busy with something or other, be it paperwork or directing the knights. This scene took on a sense of unreality, eating bad soup with a prince in the middle of the night.

They chatted a bit as they ate. When they were finished, Rishe felt sufficiently recovered to finally discuss the situation—the whole reason Arnold had come. Despite that, she insisted on clearing the dishes first.

“Basically, I need them to agree to my ‘unreasonable orders’—and to do that, I must make them a profit.” A rather vague explanation of her plan, but surely that was better than a long and boring one? Arnold was frowning, so she added, “The Aria Trading Company wants to expand its influence worldwide into a leading business, you see. I predict they’ll acquire unique, otherwise unattainable goods as they expand their trading routes.”

“Their track record over the past two years supports that, or so I’ve heard,” Arnold agreed.

“I want their cooperation. That’s why I contacted them, but they declined my business because my goals are opaque. Therefore, I...suggested different terms.”

“Which are?” Arnold asked with some trepidation.

“I have one week to bring Mr. Tully a business idea that will be popular in the imperial capital. If I can meet his standards, he’ll make me into a trading partner.”

Hearing this unvarnished explanation, Arnold subsided into silence.

No doubt he wanted a more robust story, but just like with Tully, Rishe couldn’t tell him everything. Arnold was the one who was going to start the war she sought to prevent; she couldn’t afford him catching on to her motives.

She braced herself for his response, but all he said was, “Fine.”

“Huh?!” she blurted, staring at him.

“Fine, I said. I understand your aims.”

Rishe didn’t know what to say. “You’re not going to ask me what my plans are for the Aria Trading Company?”

“You suggested these other terms instead because you’re hiding something, right? And I doubt you want to tell me.”

“Well, you’re right.”

“You won’t tell me, so why bother to ask? More pressingly, what deal do you plan to offer him?”

He’d touched a sore spot. Rishe hung her head. “I have a few ideas, but nothing foolproof. I don’t know the area or the consumer base. I haven’t been here long enough to know what’s popular.”

That kind of investigation took time, which Tully knew as well as she did. Hence the short deadline.

“In other words, this will cause you difficulty.”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” His tone held something she couldn’t glean, and she looked over to

find him grinning slyly. “I look forward to watching this play out.”

I knew it! Rishe couldn’t see through to Arnold’s true intentions, but she was beginning to notice a pattern. He still looked good even when he was smirking arrogantly, the bastard.

Rishe stewed in her annoyance as Arnold rose from his seat. “Like I’ve told you before, you’re free to do whatever you like. I’ll retire to the main palace.”

“Very well. Have a good night.”

In the doorway, he looked back. “Rishe, have you met my brother yet?”

“Your brother?” This was the first she’d heard of him. “No, I don’t think I have. Well, I suppose it’s possible, since I don’t know what he looks like.”

“Good.” Arnold hesitated. “Should he approach you, I ask that you avoid speaking to him any way you can.”

“His name is Theodore, right? May I ask why I shouldn’t speak with him?” It wasn’t exactly an amicable way to act toward a future brother-in-law.

“It’s better if you don’t know.”

Rishe was quiet for a moment. “If that’s what you want.”

Arnold left, closing the door behind him.

The next day, Rishe headed out to her garden, despairing over how best to begin her investigation into her business plan. Just then, voices rang out behind her, catching her off guard.

“M-my lady! Please, you must return to your chambers at once.”

“His Highness will be so angry! Please, I beg you!”

Rishe surveyed the knights as they tripped over each other in concern. *What in the world?*

A boy lay sprawled in the freshly tilled dirt, apparently napping. Rishe did not recognize him from any of her many lives. He had hair as black as Arnold’s, and even asleep, he radiated an androgynous beauty.

Bewildered, she muttered, “And I just finished tilling this soil too.”

“My lady!” a knight yelped. “That’s not the issue!”

He was right. Black hair was unusual on this continent, so it was obvious who this boy was.

“That’s His Royal Highness, Prince Theodore!”

I thought so. The beautiful boy snoozing away in the dirt was indeed Arnold’s little brother. *I can’t believe I have to deal with him literally the day after Arnold warned me not to.*

She’d never known of Theodore’s existence before this life. Coming from abroad, she had no reason to study the makeup of the Galkhein imperial family. All she knew about the boy was what she had heard since her arrival.

If I remember correctly, he’s four years younger than Prince Arnold. Which means he’s fifteen, like me. There were six children in the Galkhein imperial family. Arnold and Theodore were the only male heirs, which meant the other four were all princesses.

“Mm.” Theodore began to stir, sending the knights back into a fuss.

“Lady Rishe, please! You must leave at once!”

The boy murmured, “Mmngh, did someone say ‘Rishe’?”

“Oops!” The knight slapped a hand over his mouth as his partner smacked him from behind.

Theodore’s eyelids fluttered open in response to hearing Rishe’s name. They were the same blue as Arnold’s, reflecting the sky. He put up an arm to ward off the sun, looking up at her. “You’re my brother’s...?”

It seemed he did know about her.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Prince Theodore. I’m so sorry I haven’t greeted you before now.” Rishe smiled warmly, despite choosing her words with all appropriate caution. “My name is Rishe Irmgard Weitzner. As fate would have it, I shall soon join the imperial household. Flawed as I am, I will do my utmost to be a valuable member of your family.”

More like a lazy member of the family. But I digress.

Theodore blinked at her sleepily. She prayed the knights wouldn't overreact again.

I don't expect a warm welcome. Rische was a hostage, after all. From Galkhein's point of view, she was nothing more than a duke's daughter from a minor nation.

As she awaited what move he'd make, Theodore sat up and smiled. "It's nice to meet you, my radiant sister-in-law!"

Rische's eyes fluttered in surprise.

His grinning face was unbelievably pretty, almost feminine. "What a stroke of luck, us meeting like this. I sent my brother so many notes, but he never replied. Although now that I see you, I understand why he'd want to keep such a lovely lady all to himself."

"You flatter me, Your Highness."

He laughed, delighted. "Please, no formalities. Be at ease." His smile was frank and friendly.

These two brothers are like night and day. They were both exceptionally handsome, but Theodore's bearing was utterly in contrast. She might not have guessed they were related if she hadn't already known. *Their features are the same in color, but their eyes and lips are just so different. Their manners certainly don't match either.*

"Whoopsie. Can't shake your hand if I've got all this dirt on me." Theodore rose to his feet, brushing the soil off himself. He was a bit taller than Rische, but much shorter than Arnold. "I'm Theodore Auguste Hein, Arnold's little brother and second in line for the throne."

Theodore held out his hand. Rische returned his friendly grin as she shook it. "A pleasure, Your Highness."

From the corner of her eye, Rische marked the knights' nerves. They'd likely been ordered to keep Rische and Theodore apart, yet they couldn't openly force Rische away from him.

“What brings you to this corner of the grounds? I myself was on a walk when I was overcome with drowsiness,” Theodore said.

“Ah! Actually, this is my field.”

“It is?” Theodore’s eyes widened. “That’s incredible! The soil around here is usually so hard! This spot gets the perfect amount of sun, and you can hear the birds too! The plants will no doubt love it as much as I do.”

“How gracious of you to say. I was planning to begin seeding today, Your Highness.”

“Then I can’t sleep here again, huh?” His grin turned cheeky. “Oh, I want to ask you something.” Theodore crouched down and pointed. “Would you mind taking a look at this?”

“Is something wrong?”

“Come here and look. That’s strange, isn’t it?” He was pointing at what appeared to be a completely ordinary patch of dirt.

Rishe crouched down to get a closer look, and that was when Theodore whispered to her: “I want to save you, Rishe Irmgard Weitzner.”

She didn’t reply at first, and Theodore looked at her with reverent sincerity. “I pity you. Dragged all the way here, not as a bride but a captive. As far as I know, no empress has ever led a happy life in Galkhein.” With his back turned to the knights, his pleasant expression melted off his face like ice. “I want to speak to you somewhere away from prying eyes.”

Rishe sighed. “Your Highness.”

A strange zeal filled Theodore’s captivating eyes. “I’ll tell you how you can run away from him.”

Rishe knew very little about the Galkhein imperial family. Perhaps this was one of the inciting incidents that would land Arnold in a war. Or specifically, Theodore was. In which case, it *would* be in her interest to accept his offer to meet in secret. *However...*

Rishe smiled. “Prince Arnold warned me not to subject myself to unnecessary dangers.”

“What?”

“As it so happens, he scolded me about it just last night,” Rishe explained modestly. “I can’t allow myself to be alone with another man. It would be imprudent—just imagine the rumors.”

Theodore gaped at her, then quickly hid it behind a scowl. “You don’t know who my brother really is. How he acts when he has a sword in his hand. How ruthless he is on the battlefield.”

“Believe me, I am quite aware of who he is.”

“And not just that, but you never know, he might try to kill y—”

“Yes, I know.” Rishe knew it so well, she relived it in her dreams. She stood back up with an indulgent smile. “There’s nothing wrong here, Your Highness. I would ask you to leave the field as you found it.”

She said it loudly for the benefit of the knights so as to make it seem their whole chat had been one about the soil. Theodore was still crouched, but the ugly expression had vanished from his pretty face.

Just now he reminded me of his brother. Well, Arnold possessed a degree more subtlety; he wouldn’t have lured her over in such an obvious way. He doesn’t seem hostile toward me, but every mention of his brother sets him on edge. And calling himself second in line for the throne—that’s no way to introduce yourself to your older brother’s fiancée.

Theodore had emphasized Arnold’s ruthlessness. He wanted Rishe to fear him.

I know what Arnold Hein is like on the battlefield, but to speak that way of your own brother? Wait. A thought struck her. Why am I so angry about this?

It shouldn’t have mattered to her what Arnold’s little brother said about him. She curtsied to Theodore with all due ceremony as she contemplated this curiosity. “I must fetch my hoe to loosen the soil, now that it’s been flattened. By your leave, Your Highness.”

After waiting for a response she didn’t receive, Rishe started to walk away, leaving the prince to stare at the ground. The knights bowed as well before

following her.

Hopefully this was enough to set something into motion.

After this conversation, she was certain—Arnold himself was the reason she hadn't yet been introduced to the royal family.

Let's see...Prince Theodore, four sisters, the empress, and the current emperor. I want to speak to him the most. But without even a basic introduction, that seemed like it'd be a long way off. She turned this over in her mind and remembered Arnold's orders from last night: *Don't talk to my brother.* Clearly, neither of them thought favorably of the other. But that wasn't rare for siblings, was it?

Why would Arnold warn me? He might have been afraid Prince Theodore would harm me. Or perhaps he fears Prince Theodore and I will join forces and conspire against him. No, maybe it really is to keep Theodore from doing something nefarious to me.

Why would Arnold prioritize Rishe over his own brother, though? She looked back thoughtfully at the knights as they followed her down the cloister between her wing and the main palace.

"Tell me, do the princes get along well?"

The answer was obvious, but the knights looked shaken all the same. "M-my lady, I'm afraid it is not our place to judge such matters."

"I suppose not," Rishe hummed. "Then were you ordered to make sure I stay away from Prince Theodore?"

"It is not our place to say," he repeated.

Their evasion was answer enough, and Rishe felt a little guilty manipulating them. "My apologies, I know it's an odd question. I'll arrange for a ration of spirits to be sent to the barracks this evening."

"You're too kind, my lady!" one said eagerly.

"We're all grateful for your refreshments," said another. "Everyone always talks about how remarkably well you seem to understand us."

She laughed. Of course she understood them—she had firsthand experience

with the knightly mind.

Regardless, I do need information. If they won't speak openly with me, I'll be forced to use another method.

A familiar voice drifted over from around the corner: "Arrange for the troops. I'll contact you shortly about the organization of the platoon."

Oh. Rishe rounded a bend and found herself at the training grounds. There, she spotted Arnold. He was speaking with a man on the verge of old age. Rishe remembered him—he was a count who worked in military affairs. She'd met him at the banquet.

The count stood with two knights, facing Arnold with an air of discontent. "With all due respect, Your Highness, this large allocation of troops hardly seems necessary. Expending so much of the treasury to protect the common population will displease the nobility."

"The nobility have their own private armies," Arnold said. "And we already provide them the financial means to maintain those armies. If they still think that's not enough, let them complain."

"Your Highness, I beg you to reconsider. Your father will surely disapprove."

Arnold's glare was chilly. "Enough. You've made your opinion known. Just follow my orders."

"Urk!"

Rishe could feel the force of Arnold's enmity from here; it made *her* gasp even though she was nowhere near. *Such a palpable tension in the air. Almost numbing.* The knights accompanying her grew noticeably nervous.

Arnold looked over. Across the distance, their eyes locked.

He's practically challenging me to see if I have anything to add. A bit unpleasant, if you ask me.

Rishe had nothing. From where she stood, Arnold's judgment was sound. She just wanted to show her support. She took a moment to decide how best to convey that, before raising her fist and clenching it, twisting her features into a slightly overblown scowl. *Give them hell, Your Highness! I hope he catches my*

drift.

Despite how deadly serious Rishe had been, Arnold frowned. *Oh no, he didn't get it? Darn. Hmm, what's another way to show I support him?* She racked her brain trying to come up with another idea, but all it did was elicit a sigh from the prince. Then he cracked a smile.

So gentle was his expression that it instantly put Rishe on guard. If she had been wearing her sword, she would have reflexively drawn it. In her defense, it was probably the emotional whiplash. He had seemed so toweringly angry with the count, and now he looked like he didn't have a care in the world.

Why in the world is he looking at me like that?!

The suffocating tension had drained from the training grounds. Arnold's expression was smooth as he said to the count, "I shall send out a missive if and when the nobility cause trouble."

"A missive?"

"We need to persuade them that protecting the common citizens of this nation is to their benefit, yes? By offering them military strength, and sending those knights out on patrol to keep the people safe, that should bring about a difference in their final tax yields."

"Er, will it?" The count looked confused.

"If the people can focus on their work, tend to their families, and raise their children in an environment with ample public security, then the nobles will be thrilled when they receive more in taxes," Arnold explained patiently.

The count opened his mouth to object, then hung his head in dejection. "By that logic, you may be able to quell the voices of dissatisfaction."

"Then I'll go ahead and calculate how much it will take to persuade them. Dismissed." Arnold turned on his heel and walked away.

Rishe heaved a great sigh when he was out of sight. Her shoulders ached from the tension.

I'm not sure what happened just now, but I'm glad it seems to be defensive instead of warmongering. God, it's incredible how much destruction beautiful

people can cause with a single look.

Glancing at the knights, she saw they were smiling for some reason. They were odd smiles, rather fond, and directed her way. She cocked her head in bemusement.

At any rate, I need to look into Theodore and Arnold's relationship. I hoped to work on my business proposal today, but that will have to wait.

With that, Rishe went off to gather intelligence.

"Those two? Why, I hear they've barely spent time together, even when they were small!" a veteran maid told Rishe.

Rishe was at the washhouse, doing laundry in her maid disguise. Now that she'd donned a pair of spectacles and a brisk manner, no one was any wiser.

"Really?" she responded casually, sorting the laundry. "Even though they live in the same palace?"

A gaggle of maids around Rishe's mother's age chimed in.

"That's right. According to the footmen who serve during meals, the family never eats together. It's got to be true based on how much they complain about getting the dining hall ready."

"I heard that the princes won't even greet each other in the halls!"

"That's just a rumor, though," another added. "They're both so handsome, surely they'd be a picture stood together."

The women giggled among themselves, the confidence of a decade's service putting them at ease.

"Why are they so distant if they're family?" Rishe asked, feigning idle curiosity.

The women cocked their own heads in puzzlement.

"That's a good question. Prince Theodore does seem to have some fondness for his older brother."

"Oh?"

“Just between you and me, I’ve heard he covets Prince Arnold’s Imperial Guards as his own.”

Rishe paused.

“Little brothers always want to copy their big brothers, down to studying the same things, even. Prince Theodore does seem to love the crown prince.”

Is that why he wanted to talk to me? To copy Arnold? That doesn’t make sense.

“As for the four princesses—they don’t even live in the imperial capital. The next time they’ll see each other will be at Prince Arnold’s wedding.”

“Speaking of,” a maid said. “That fiancée of his sure is something. Right, new girl?”

Rishe looked up. “Huh? Whatever do you mean?”

“I haven’t seen you before, so you must be a maid from her palace. I was worried when I heard she’d only taken on new girls, but all seems to be well. I think it’s great that those newbies are learning the ropes so quickly.”

“I agree!” Rishe was always happy to hear her maids praised. “Miss Diana and the others are great teachers. We’ve been learning so much. It’s quite amazing how they have devised a system that could only work in that style of detached wing.”

Rishe had only overseen things for the first few days. The inexperienced maids were focused and dedicated, thriving in their new positions, and Diana’s squad was performing well in their roles as teachers. Instead of mocking mistakes, they took it as a challenge to figure out a better teaching method for the future. When the girls were done with their work for the day, they focused on studying.

Each maid-turned-teacher was figuring out her own individual style to be proud of. One excelled at detailed explanation, while another had a talent for drawings and diagrams. The inventive ones—good at scolding *or* praising—came up with new methods to encourage their students to follow in their footsteps.

Rishe instructed the maids on their work for about two hours a day now, but soon she'd be able to hand the reins over to Diana completely. And once the cleaning up of the detached palace was finished, Arnold would be joining her. Rishe didn't know how she felt about that.

"Speaking of the detached palace, have you heard?" one of the maids asked Rishe.

"Heard what?"

"Prince Arnold went to call on Lady Rishe just last night."

Rishe jumped with such a start that she nearly dropped her laundry. The maids' intelligence network was unparalleled, which was why she had come here for information in the first place, but she hadn't expected this.

"You work at the detached palace right, new girl? Do you know about that?"

"L-Lady Rishe went to bed early, she wasn't feeling well," Rishe stammered. "I d-don't think the prince would have gone to see her if she was ill."

"Oh, how boring."

"Well, let us know if you hear anything. My daughters badger me every night for the latest gossip."

"To think Prince Arnold will finally be wed. All the young girls in the city are talking about it."

"But it's not just the young girls either, is it? We're talking about them too!" All the maids laughed at that.

Rishe focused on keeping her face marble-smooth as she washed, determined not to let the chatty maids discover who she really was.

After gathering sufficient information during her recon laundry duty, Rishe returned to her room by way of the rope still hanging down into the courtyard. Once inside, she changed her clothes and left her chambers. She proceeded to her garden, escorted by her guards. She'd once again tilled the ground Theodore had flattened with her trusty hoe, and today she was finally going to plant her seeds.

Rishe pressed a finger into the moist earth up to her second joint, dropping two seeds into each hole she made. She then gently covered them with dirt and dampened the surface. She figured she should see sprouts within the next few days with the current weather.

Daydreaming about a lovely future lush with herbs, Rishe allowed her guards to escort her back to her chambers. She moved sedately, as a crown princess ought, but on the inside, she was twisting with mounting anxiety.

It's so late already. I have to scrub off this mud in the bath and come up with a deal for Mr. Tully. I hear there's a library in the imperial palace—perhaps I can learn something about the populace there. The gender ratio, age brackets, number of shops... And I can gather information about Prince Theodore while I'm at it. She piled more and more things onto her to-do list. Diana asked me to take a look at the new teaching materials she's come up with. Also, I need to start planning the wedding and putting some strategies in place for dealing with guests from abroad. And then—

“Lady Rishe? Are you quite well?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

Rishe’s eyes had gone glassy and faraway as they climbed the stairs to her chambers, but she was determined to conquer her obligations.

I can't wait to have an empty schedule! I'm going to be lazy and sleep in until noon every day so I can live a long life. All this scheming is to ensure I finally live past twenty. She looked at the floor as she walked.

Before she knew it, they had reached her chambers. She glanced up to see guards flanking the door.

“We shall stand guard here for you, my lady. Please, be at ease.”

“Thank you. I’ll—” Rishe opened the door and stopped short.

An envelope crinkled under her feet. Someone must have slid it underneath the door.

“Is something the matter, my lady?”

“No.” She thought for a moment, then shook her head and stepped inside in a

way that kept the curious item hidden from their view.

Alone at last, she picked it up. It bore the seal of the Galkhein imperial family, pressed into red wax. Inside she found a card. Written in a beautiful hand were the words: *I'll tell you my secrets. Meet me in the chapel at nine o'clock tonight.*
—Arnold Hein

In silence, Rishe put the letter back into its envelope. She then summoned Elsie to help her prepare.

Dressed in a black gown, Rishe arrived at the secluded chapel at nine o'clock, just as ordered. When she'd shown them the official seal on her letter, her guards agreed to take up positions outside the chapel walls, understanding that their mistress wished to be alone with her fiancé.

Inside, the only illumination was moonlight through the stained-glass windows. The man behind the letter was already waiting for her. Rishe stood at the entrance and called out a name that did not belong to her future husband.

"Good evening, Prince Theodore."

A soft laugh reached her. "A good evening to you as well, my lovely sister-in-law." The boy stood at the end of a long red carpet, just as she had predicted. "You don't seem surprised to see me. I suppose you knew it was me all along?" Theodore said with a smile.

Rishe gave a shallow sigh. "Your forgery wasn't very good. Prince Arnold didn't sign that note."

"I had assumed you wouldn't have seen his signature before," Theodore said. "How odd."

Theodore was right—she hadn't seen it in this life. But in previous lives, Arnold had sent declarations of war to each nation. She'd never forget that document after all the times she'd seen it. Arnold's penmanship was good, but his signature was messy. The signature in the letter she had received had been comparatively too neat.

"Why did you come here if you knew I was the sender? Weren't you the one

who said you wouldn't put yourself in a position to be alone with another man? Oh, that must be why you haven't shut the doors."

"That, and my guards are outside." She'd taken additional measures too, but he didn't need to know about those.

Theodore played with a lock of his hair, looking bored. "I was hoping we could be friends, Lady Rishe. I have invaluable information for you. My brother has very strange tastes."

"Is that what you wanted to tell me?" Rishe said briskly. "Please keep it brief."

"The other day, you claimed you knew how ruthless my brother could be." His clear voice took on a sinister note. "But you're wrong. If you did know, you wouldn't be so calm." He took a step toward Rishe. "No one in our family is close, you see. Her Majesty—our father's current empress—isn't our biological mother. She's a second wife."

"That's not unusual among royals."

"Is it not? Is it per the usual, then, for a man's son to kill his previous wife?" A fierce light shone in his eyes—eyes the same color as Arnold's. He came closer, a bewitching smile growing on his face. "My brother killed our mother. But, of course, you know that. You know just how ruthless he is. You were enticed here by the title of crown princess, but you're better off leaving the likes of him. Do you understand? He's the sort of man who would kill his *own mother*."

Rishe was silent.

"The women who marry into our family lead unhappy lives. I hope now you understand better what I meant. This isn't a mere threat—you may very well be murdered by your husband."

"I was wondering what you had summoned me here to say." Rishe stared at him for a few moments, then sighed again. "Is that it?"

Theodore took a stunned step back, panic briefly flickering over his face. "H—he murdered his own mother! How can you be so calm after hearing something so repulsive?!"

Because I've already seen his criminal record. I know exactly what he'll do in

the future.

After killing his father and ascending his throne, Arnold would mobilize his nation's army. He would invade countless nations and murder their royal families as well. He would crush those who opposed him on the front lines, annihilating dissenters. Then, he would kill Rishe.

She'd made her choice with clear eyes. "Come what may, I will marry Prince Arnold."

Theodore gaped at her.

Now that I think about it, there's something I've only just learned by being here. She'd witnessed Arnold's nature up close and seen on the outside he at least *appeared* decent. He was unfriendly and lukewarm, but he had a political mind that he put to work taking care of those who relied on him, as well as his citizens.

And still, she did not have her answer. *Why in the world does he start a war?* What would go wrong in the next few years that would cause so drastic a change? Or was he just adept at hiding his monstrous nature, which would break free from its cage in five years?

Wait... What if his hand will be forced? What if he's a pawn in someone else's game? Rishe grinned. *I truly am a fool.*

Theodore shrank back from her smile. "Haven't you noticed how Arnold has no middle name? That's because my mother and father didn't bless him at his birth! They didn't want him—he's cursed."

"What use is a middle name, truly? Sure, I have Irmgard, but mine is hardly worth commenting on, Prince Theodore *Auguste* Hein."

"What are you—"

"Are you quite finished?" Rishe looked up at him, unblinking. "If so, I'll be on my way." Rishe turned back on the threshold. "Instead..."

"Wait!" Theodore cried.

"You brothers have a nice chat," she finished.

"Oh." Theodore's voice died in his throat.

At the door stood Arnold, cold radiating off him in waves.

“Brother.” Theodore gulped. “Why are you here of all places? Wait, did you come here for *her*?” He rounded on Rishe, taking a stumbling step backward. His expression slipped from annoyance to dismay as he looked up at his brother. “You don’t understand; I wasn’t being serious! It was just a joke. She’s going to be my sister, so I just wanted to scare her a little!”

“Theodore.”

The boy flinched.

“Did I not order you to stay away from Rishe?”

Theodore quailed under Arnold’s gaze, the fathomless cold. His face was utterly blank, but somehow it held so much malice that it was as if a sword were pointed at Theodore’s throat.

Theodore hung his head low, trembling as he forced out the words, “I’m sorry, Brother.”

Arnold looked away with indifference. “Rishe, let’s go.”

“Wait, Your Highness. I think you should speak with your brother a bit longer.”

“There’s no point.”

“But—”

She still didn’t know Theodore’s endgame. What had been the point of this? Arnold’s scolding had turned him into a trembling little boy. *Prince Theodore was trying to make me afraid of his brother. But why?*

“Rishe.”

“Coming.” Clearly Arnold had no desire to remain, and Rishe turned to follow him, resigned to her ignorance.

Then she heard Theodore whisper, “It’s just as I predicted, Sister.”

A chill ran down her spine. She looked back over her shoulder. Theodore wasn’t trembling.

He’s laughing?

The giggles racked his body as he fought to hold them back, face lit with a bewitching darkness. His beauty made Rishe's breath catch even as Theodore said in a meek voice, "I'm so sorry, Brother." When Arnold looked back, Theodore's expression had returned to one of contrition. "I will go, though I doubt you will forgive me. And, Sister—I'm sorry for frightening you. I promise in the future I will treat you with all the proper respect due to my brother's wife."

Theodore bowed deeply to Rishe and smiled at his brother. "Good night, Brother. I'm so glad to speak to you after such a long time."

Theodore brushed by Arnold on his way out the door, leaving them with nothing but the trembling echoes of that unsettling smile.

The two were alone in the chapel now. Arnold broke the silence first. "I believe I told you the same thing, Rishe."

That's right, I wasn't supposed to talk to Theodore either.

"He used your name to summon me—I couldn't just ignore it. And I expected that you'd find time in your busy schedule to accompany me."

"As if I would ignore the reply to a letter I never even sent."

It made sense. After receiving Theodore's forged letter, Rishe had summoned Elsie and written a reply. *Thank you for the invitation, Your Highness. I shall conduct myself to the chapel at 9:30 tonight, as you have specified.*

She'd given herself a half hour alone with Theodore, but Arnold had arrived fifteen minutes early.

I'm thankful he did. I just wish he hadn't had to hear his brother slander him.

"Something wrong?"

Rishe began to shake her head but stopped. Maybe she could just *ask*. "Why did he say those things about you? That you're ruthless."

Arnold glanced away briefly. "Probably because it's true. I've killed countless people on the battlefield. I am not...delicate in my manner. My brutality is known far and wide."

I know that. That's not what I meant. "I could learn that anywhere," she said.

“Then what is it you want to know?”

She wasn't sure how to word this. “Your heart.” This was something only Arnold could tell her.

“My...heart?”

“I have heard of your many great feats during the previous war. And I've seen what you were like in battle when those bandits attacked our carriage. But you didn't kill them.”

Rishe's theory at the time had been that it was because they'd been attacked by foreign countrymen. But she doubted that the diabolical Emperor Arnold Hein of her memory would care about that. But after weeks of observation, she wasn't sure of anything anymore.

“I was wondering what you were talking about.” A shadow fell over his blue eyes. “It appears I've gone too easy on you.”

He reached toward her, and his black-gloved hand slowly wrapped around her neck. “If you want to survive in this palace, you'll disabuse yourself of this naivete.” His fingers dug into her throat. It was only a threat of pressure, but it would take only a bit more to strangle her.

And yet, Rishe was unafraid. “I believe in my own observations and conclusions.”

“What are you saying? You've never seen me on the battlefield.”

“Be that as it may,” Rishe said, “I believe that the person who cares about my desires is the real you.”

“What a foolish thing to say,” he said in a low, husky voice. “I brought you here to use you.”

“All the more so, then, if that's the case.” Rishe gently placed her hand on top of his. She didn't try to pull it away—instead she pressed down, exerting pressure on her own throat. “You aren't ruthless at all, husband.”

Arnold grimaced, breathing out a huff of annoyance. She expected him to push her away, but they just stood there, eyes locked. The moment stretched on, neither of them moving.

It was Arnold who broke the silence. “Where does this confidence come from? This determination?”

Rishe frowned, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Sometimes you get this look in your eye. Like you’re meeting me in the field.”

It was as if he were looking through her to the past. Rishe could say nothing.

Arnold took his hand from her neck, cupping her cheek instead. The moonlight shone through the stained-glass window, casting the shadow of his lashes over his face. He brushed his thumb against the corner of her eye.

“You have the gaze of someone ready to die for what she believes in, who will fight for it with every last breath. You look like...someone who still believes life is worth living.”

Rishe found herself unable to move. All she could do was look up at Arnold.

In her eyes, Arnold seemed to be gazing past her, to wars fought long ago, far away. Perhaps he was seeing the faces of the people he had killed.

“Having to end the life of someone like that,” he said, “is what I fear most in the world.”

Rishe didn’t say a word. So, he was afraid. Sometimes. She knew it. She’d known it all along. No matter what the past contained, or the future held, the man who stood before her was not a merciless killer.

“I...” Rishe swallowed, finding her voice again. “Sometimes, I feel like I don’t belong in this world anymore.”

It was an incoherent confession, but she said it anyway. She didn’t know how else to answer his question.

He waited for her to continue. Rishe pushed herself on, adding lies to the truth she couldn’t offer him. “I’ve had dreams of...watching myself die. But I’m not dreaming now. I’m here, breathing and alive. But despite knowing I’m awake, I am still very afraid sometimes.”

“What are you afraid of?”

Rishe breathed out. “That—that I’m already dead. That my life ended in that instant and this world is nothing but an endless dream.”

As soon as she spoke, Rishe felt a hard pressure on her chest. *What’s this I’m feeling?*

Instantly, it clicked: She wasn’t lying. Deep down, there was a part of her that believed this. She didn’t want this life to end in death. Her seventh life would be the one she survived. She wanted to do her best to keep on living.

But she’d thought that in her past lives as well. She’d lived through the second and third, the fourth, the fifth and sixth life—always with that truth lurking in the innermost depths of her heart. No matter what she did, in five years, it would all be over. Perhaps this world wasn’t even real. And once her thoughts drifted in that direction, all she felt was paralyzing fear.

Stop it. Rishe squeezed her eyes shut. *The fear means nothing. I’ll turn it into strength. It doesn’t matter.*

Fear crept up on you faster the longer you stood still, so she looked up at Arnold again.

“I’ve made up my mind,” she told Arnold. “I don’t care if this life is a dream or if I’m destined for some awful end—I won’t run away.”

“Rishe...”

“I’m not what you think,” she said. “I’m not a warrior. But I am resolute in my determination to be your wife.”

Destiny would likely never lead her down this path again. After living her life over and over again, she’d experienced firsthand how difficult it was to force events to play out identically. She had to do her utmost now. To stop the war, to save herself.

And to save Arnold, who might not desire a future soaked in blood after all.

“That’s why I want to understand your heart,” she added.

He let out a short scornful laugh, almost inhuman. His hand slid from her cheek down to her chin. With his other arm, he drew her close by her waist.

Then a pair of soft lips met hers.



Rishe gasped into his kiss, mind struggling to keep up. An eternity seemed to pass before he drew away. He whispered, "You're a fool."

But his voice was gentle, full of sympathy, as if he were trying to persuade a child. And it was with a distinct note of loneliness that he said, "You don't need to be resolute to become my wife."

Chapter 4

THE EVENING AFTER the incident at the chapel, Rishe was hurrying about the small kitchen of the detached palace. However, she wasn't preparing food. A sweet, floral smell attracted the attention of a nearby maid, who sneaked up to peek.

"My lady?! What in the world—"

Piles and piles of flowers covered the table. Rishe gave them a little awkward chuckle as she plucked the petals off wilting roses. She had asked Elsie and the other maids to buy up as many unsold bouquets as they could from florists across the city.

"Sorry for the mess. I'll be sure to clean them up, don't worry."

"Erm, sure, but that's not why I'm surprised!"

Rishe hadn't stopped with roses. There were orange gerberas and purple gentians. A mass of pink petals was already simmering on the stove.

"Oh! Are you going to dye something?" the maid asked, her face lighting up.

Rishe smiled at her. "I can't tell you yet. But as soon as I'm finished, all of you will be the first to try it. Of course, I won't force you if you don't want to."

"I'd love to help!" the astute maid answered. "I'm not sure with what yet, but I'll be happy to."

"Thanks."

The maid returned to work, surely wondering what Rishe could possibly be brewing in the pot.

The girl seemed confident, but Rishe doubted she'd ever guess what the bottle sitting on the corner of the table contained. She began to clear up the leaves and stems. *Maybe I should let this simmer a bit longer. I'm all done with the petals now.*

Rishe sat down, rechecking a piece of paper containing all the information she had copied from various documents during a morning spent cooped up in the

library. The population distribution for the imperial capital of Galkhein. The shifts in economic conditions. The state of affairs in surrounding areas and information detailing merchants and tourists. She sank into thought.

Based on this, I've come up with a deal to offer Mr. Tully. But I'm not completely happy with it.

She still had five days to go. Her samples should be finished by then, and the information she'd gathered should be enough to assure him of a potential profit, and to come up with a way for calculating interest rates and other such things. Although she was sure of her victory, she wasn't satisfied.

All of this is publicly available information. She looked again at her writing. *The fiancée of the crown prince should know so much more.*

Rishe felt that keenly while reading the documents. She knew that Arnold had amassed political power as a result of his various feats during the war three years prior. The first thing he'd done was allocate reparations from other countries to purchase products from rural areas for a huge lump sum.

Although Galkhein had won the war, the victory was only felt by an elite few. The soldiers who fought, the blacksmiths who forged their swords, and the apothecaries who had made medicines for the front lines had all lost their jobs. Many of them sought work in the city—and when there was none to be found, they lived in the slums.

Meanwhile, the countryside had suffered from a labor shortage even during the war. There was no money to pay the wages of the men returning from battle, and the population continued to decline. Productivity in farming and fishing villages went down, heralding a huge spike in food prices nationwide.

Arnold had been taking measures to prevent that.

He used reparation funds to buy up crops and seafood. Once those industries were flush with cash, the jobless workers would begin to return to the countryside. According to the recent travel permit records Rishe had pored over, the strategy seemed to be working—the majority of permits had been granted to those traveling to the countryside to farm and for other similar reasons. People were returning home to find jobs. The supplies Arnold had bought up were offered to the destitute at subsidized prices, filling their bellies.

He'd invested a huge chunk of his own wealth in his scheme, and to show for it he had Galkhein's increased productivity and rising birth rate. That meant an increase in tax yields and morale.

Rishe had learned all this solely from the documentation. *This is the sort of thing you'd never learn from living outside of Galkhein.*

The scene from the previous evening continued to play back in her mind. How Arnold had said, "You don't need to be resolute in becoming my wife."

What did that even mean? She couldn't bring herself to ask him. The look on his face was too desolate, and too familiar.

That was exactly how he looked when he killed me.

There were so many things she wanted to know, but she'd held her tongue as he walked away. All she could do was replay the night over and over, remembering how he had kissed her. Rishe flinched at the memory, pressing her forehead to the table.

There wasn't any deep meaning in that. How could there be? She had to stop thinking about this; she had far more pressing matters to attend to. Rishe squeezed her eyes shut and stood up, giving her cheeks a light pat and shifting her focus back to what was important.

First things first, on to the next step. I need to finish this!

She took the pot off the stove, straining the boiled petals from the liquid, letting them cool down as she readied another pot. Once the petals were no longer scalding hot, she wrapped them in a cloth and wrung them out.

Next, she picked up the glass bottle on the table. Inside was a clear, viscous liquid from the sap of a common tree. She mixed it together with the flower dye, taking care not to form bubbles. Once it was a uniform color, she poured the liquid back into the bottle, rocking it from side to side to settle it. That gave her a small vial of deep pink.

Rishe opened another glass bottle, dipping a small prepared brush inside. The contents were a milky color, made by mixing the sap of various herbs. Carefully, she smoothed the mixture over her nails. On top of that, she painted on the pink color, making sure there were no bumps.

Ten seconds later, the liquid began to feel hot. She waited several minutes, being careful not to do anything with her fingers. When she finally touched her nails, she found the lacquer glossy and hard. It set just as she was hoping.

Perfect. Rishe gazed at her rose-colored nails with satisfaction. The hardened sap shone like gems on her fingertips.

This was a substance Rishe had invented during her life as an apothecary. She'd used this concoction to strengthen the cracked nails of the injured. It was made of the sap of the common collini trees, mixed with three kinds of crushed herbs. The lacquer solidified in just a few minutes.

I need to experiment with other flowers to make sure the colors come out and how well they harden, she was thinking to herself when Elsie appeared.

"My lady, I thought I told you to take a break." She had been checking on Rishe all day and was thoroughly displeased to find her still in the kitchen. "I'll make you some tea, then you should sit down—"

She stopped, apparently having noticed Rishe's nails. Her eyes lit up like stars. "They're so shiny!"

Rishe couldn't help but chuckle at her adorable squeal of excitement. "You've come at a good time." She'd had a feeling Elsie would like this.

She instructed Elsie to wash her hands thoroughly and sit down across the table from her. After making sure that Elsie didn't have any open cuts or wounds, Rishe went to work. She dipped the brush into the milky-white liquid, explaining how it worked as she painted Elsie's nails.

"In a country far to the east, they have a culture of dyeing their nails with flowers. If we use this strengthening ointment for your nails below the pigment, the dye should last for a while, even with your cleaning duties."

Curious, Elsie asked, "Do you mean it makes your nails stronger? Mine break so easily."

"This should help with that. But the best remedy for brittle nails is to eat balanced meals rich in plenty of meat, fish, and legumes. Nails are a part of your skin. What's good for your skin is good for your nails."

“Meat, fish, and legumes,” Elsie muttered. “I’ll remember that. My family is poor, but I have my wages now!”

“You mentioned your family has fallen on hard times.”

Elsie nodded. “Even when we do buy meat and vegetables, it’s only enough to feed my younger brother and sister.”

Rishe had learned about Elsie’s family back before Elsie was her maid, when she’d mentioned why she needed this job so badly. It was all for their sake.

I know the capital city contains slums—one of the knights from our journey mentioned it after the bandit attack. He told me he was from a poor district. Rishe painted more base coat onto Elsie’s nails. *Doubtless Arnold’s measures aren’t enough to save everyone. His policies have been so unpopular, some people have tried to block them.*

Having finished the base coat, Rishe brought out the dyed sap polish. Elsie was transfixed, letting out a little coo of admiration as she watched. “It’s so beautiful. I’ve never seen anything so glossy and pretty.”

Elsie liked dressing up. She seemed to enjoy choosing Rishe’s gowns and doing her hair. She was so deft with her hands that she’d likely be excellent at applying polish on her own.

Rishe said, “I only have pink right now, but tell me what your favorite color is. I’ll give you the bottle when it’s finished.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly accept something so lovely.”

“On the contrary,” Rishe said. “You should most certainly accept. For my sake too. Seeing all of you wear my creation will make me happy.”

“My lady, I...”

Rishe let out a breath of relief as she finished with Elsie’s right hand. Mistakes with the polish were hard to fix. “What color would you like? We could do the pale blue of forget-me-nots or yellow of sunflowers. There’s also red, orange, pink, or purple. Your skin is so pale, I’m sure any color would look good on you.”

Elsie gazed at Rishe in wonder. “Oh.” Tears welled in her eyes.

“Elsie? What’s wrong? Are you hurt?” Rishe panicked a little. Did she have a

cut that Rishe had missed? It wouldn't be good for the liquid to seep in.

Elsie shook her head. "No, it's just..." She blinked away her tears, stemming the drip of the pearl-like droplets. "I've never worn something so pretty before." She couldn't seem to hold herself back. "My siblings always came first. Whatever money we got a hold of was spent on essentials." Her quiet voice was strangled down to a whisper. "I've never had anything to dress my hair, and my clothes have always been worn hand-me-downs from the boys. This maid's uniform is the first thing I've had that's *mine*."

Rishe remembered just how upset Elsie had been over her dress getting stained at their first meeting.

"I was overjoyed to officially receive this uniform when you took me into your employ. I never thought I'd actually be allowed something so beautiful of my own."



Elsie wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. "I'm happy, my lady. I promise. I don't even know how to tell you how happy."

"Oh, Elsie." Rishe gently patted the girl's head.

"I'm so happy!" Elsie sobbed louder.

Right then, Rishe understood what it meant that all her maids were working for their families' sakes. No doubt they were like Elsie, pushing aside their dreams and aspirations.

Thanks to the insights from my current life, I now know what this business deal with Aria has been lacking.

On the day of Rishe's deadline, Tully and four other managers assembled in the main palace's parlor. All of them were people she remembered fondly from her previous lives. She sat across from them, outlining her business idea.

"Women use this product to decorate their nails." Rishe gestured to the seven maids arrayed behind her. They each wore different colors of polish—from pink to bright blue to light green, all glossy and vibrant. "I have written down a brief summary of Galkhein's economic situation. Many common families have money to spend, but beauty products are very dear. Gowns and jewels are out of their reach, but my polish won't be."

She presented the document to Tully. The names of the ingredients were redacted, but she'd included their individual costs and the retail price for the finished products. Pulling out another document, she said, "This is a transcript of visitors to the city. As you can see, many are men in the prime of their lives."

Tully squinted down at the paper. "Right you are. And I presume these fellows have homes and families to return to."

"My product will make the perfect gift," Rishe assured him. "The bottles are small and compact."

That meant they would be easy to distribute abroad as well. Perfect for a company like Aria, which made most of its sales in storefronts.

"So, what do you think, Mr. Tully?"

Tully didn't take his eyes off Rishe as he spoke to his managers. "Chester, Melvin, Neal, Russel. What are your thoughts?"

In turn, each offered his opinion.

"I think it's sound. I don't know if I trust her cost analysis, but I foresee no problems with mass production."

"A bottle would sell for about two thousand gold? That'd be quite the profit."

"She must be using flowers for the dyes. If they're rare or regional, then we'll need to add an import tax for other countries."

"Tch. Uncouth, the lot of you." Tully pressed his brow and shrugged in exasperation. "Is it only about cost and profits to you?"

"Th-then what do you think, sir?"

"Do I have to spell it out? We need to go to the consumer." Tully turned his customer-service smile on the girls arrayed behind Rishe. "My dears, what are your opinions on your nails?"

"Oh, um..."

Tully had a devilish smile, and as he turned it on her maids, Rishe solemnly prayed that all of them could see through it—and every other good-for-nothing man who'd try the same, for that matter.

The girls hesitated, a bit flushed, then spoke cautiously. "We have to look at our hands a lot while we work. It helps my morale, being able to look down and see such pretty nails."

"I feel like they're helping me do a better job." Another maid giggled. "I know that's silly, but..."

"It's hard to paint both hands on our own, so we help each other. It's fun! We were even talking about how we'd like to try our hand at doing little designs when we get a bit better at it."

Elsie, ever shy, added her opinion last. "I love it. It makes me so happy." Her nails were a coral-red from the gerberas. When Rishe had asked which shade she wanted, Elsie didn't even hesitate in answering, "The same as your hair, my lady."

“See, what did I tell you?” Tully leaned back in his chair. “The looks on their faces alone tell me this product will be a hit, production costs be damned.”

“Does that mean Lady Rishe passes your test, Boss?”

Tully’s eyes took on a dangerous glint. “Now that’s a completely different question.”

The maids murmured among one another, confused at the sudden change in his demeanor.

Tully picked up the documents Rishe had laid on the table, glancing back over them. “Production cost involves an array of factors, not just the price of ingredients or whether it can be mass-produced.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” one of his men agreed.

“The demand for this product will be high. It’s unique. If *I’d* invented this, I would have jacked up the price and sold it to aristocrats.” Tully watched Rishe with an openly searching gaze. “I’m sure the thought occurred to you, my lady. So my question is—what are your motives?”

Rishe smiled demurely. He’d seen through her again. “Mr. Tully, since you find my product so pleasing, could we get down to business?”

“Down to business?” asked one of Tully’s men. “Weren’t we already doing that?”

Rishe and Tully ignored the confused staff members, squaring off across the table. “Shall we open the negotiations?” she pressed.

The maids took their leave. The only people remaining were Rishe, the trading company representatives, and Rishe’s guards. The air was tense. Tully’s staff exchanged uncomfortable looks.

“With your permission, I’ll start off with some advice.” Tully raised a hand with a self-deprecating grin, perhaps to keep Rishe from taking it personally. “Do you really want to discuss this further? This is a marvelous product. If you agree to my proposed strategy of putting this on the market as a luxury product for the rich, I’d pass you in an instant.”

“I really do.” Rishe leveled her gaze at him. “The discussion will continue, Mr.

Tully.”

“Then please, say your piece.”

Rishe passed another document to Tully. “This is a copy of a recently instated policy. Three years ago, Galkhein established a nationwide minimum wage.”

“Interesting.” Tully glanced over the document. “I see now. Employers must pay their employees at least this stated amount, no matter who they are. Lest they break the law.”

“Ever since this policy was passed,” Rishe went on, “deaths by overwork have gone down—as has poverty. It’s easier to make a steady income. Quite frankly, this is the policy that has jump-started Galkhein’s economy.”

“However, the only people benefiting from this are people with jobs,” Tully said, catching on.

Arnold’s law increased workers’ income. But because of that, the burden of the higher wages was placed on their employers. So, while overall income had increased, and some people had comfortable hours and food on the table, employment was down. The ones who couldn’t find jobs were still starving.

“Next, I would like you to direct your attention to this document.” Rishe showed him the next sheet of paper. “Supplies for the ingredients and manufacturing workshops. This is all the information you need for mass production, including channels of distribution. Your manufacturing costs will be low. But this does not include the cost of labor.”

“Oh dear.” Tully bent forward and propped his elbow on his knee. “I think I know where you’re heading, but let me ask anyway: What do you want me to do?”

“Employ from poor areas who are at their wits’ end, the ones hit worst by deprivation.” Rishe straightened up. “I will give you the recipe if—and only if—you agree to this condition.”

The gleam in Tully’s eye was snuffed out in an instant. “What a noble request.” He gave a deep sigh. “I’m disappointed in you, missy.”

“Kaine Tully!” snapped one of the guards. “Watch your tongue! You will

address the crown princess by her title.”

“No, it’s all right.” Rishe called off the loyal knights and kept her eyes on Tully. “I believe that even with this proposal, this product will bring in sufficient profits. It is, admittedly, less than you’d make selling it as a luxury good.”

“Now, now. *Sufficient* isn’t enough for greedy merchants like me. If you want to run a charity, go talk to a priest.”

Rishe had been expecting this reaction. Tully wasn’t a cruel man, but he appreciated the aesthetics of a good deal. “I’m not asking you to run a charity—I’m asking you to strike a bargain.”

“What?” Tully frowned. His other staff gave her confused looks too.

“A long time ago, a man told me that the very best merchants choose their own customers.”

The man who had told her that in the past had given her a very shrewd look. He was doing that now.

Rishe didn’t let it trip her up. “A few days ago, I learned of a recent allocation of funds to the poor—a large stimulus, postwar.”

“I know about that, yes,” Tully said. “I believe it was a policy introduced by the crown prince. Even us cutthroats can appreciate a decree meant to save people and help a country flourish.”

“Exactly. The citizens would have starved without those measures. And they will again, if the royal family and nobility think only of lining their own pockets.”

During her life as a merchant, Rishe had traveled to many different places. Galkhein’s allies in the war had emerged victorious as well, but not nearly as well-off. Some of them were even worse off than countries on the losing side.

“When spending goes down, the economy stagnates. When that happens, workers have nowhere to work and grow poor again. If the cycle continues, even the wealthiest families would be destined for collapse. They live off the taxes their citizens provide, after all.”

Tully gave a dry laugh. “You’re trying to tell me that a country can’t become rich if they hoard all their wealth in one place. That wealth should be

redistributed.”

“No, I prefer to think of it in a different way,” Rishe said, and then she smiled. “I daresay you’d agree. Let us not choose our customers but rather *create* our customers with our very own hands.”

Tully sucked in a breath, his eyes widening. She had him now.

“Most merchants don’t see those in poverty as potential customers, right? They can’t afford anything besides basic necessities, after all.” Elsie had told Rishe exactly that the other day. “But I’d like you to imagine for a moment—what would the market look like if all those people found jobs tomorrow, and they no longer had to scrape by?”

“Hmm...”

“All of those people would become potential customers. By increasing your customer base, you’ll sell even more than before. That kind of cycle is self-sustaining.” Rishe drew a circle in the air with her index finger, and her smile grew. “That, in turn, would mean great things for the products that the Aria Trading Company has to offer, would it not? By expanding your customer base, your company will be raking in the highest profits possible.”

Tully, who had been eyeing her coldly, suddenly burst into a full belly laugh. “Ha! I like it. I like it a lot! You’re not suggesting I pick my customers so much as raise them from the ground up.”

“The profits may be modest at first, but the growth will be exponential. As a result, Galkhein’s revenue will increase as well. And as I am the future empress, this concerns me.” She’d said it quite bluntly, but she was being honest.

At first, Rishe had looked at her deal from the point of view of a merchant. She’d operated from the standpoint that her task was to design a product with a high profit yield. However, once she learned of the policy Arnold had put into place, she’d had doubts about her plan.

After hearing Elsie’s feelings, she’d realized how thoughtless she had been. Rishe shouldn’t be thinking as a merchant but as a crown princess. Profits and prosperity came from a country’s people. And to prosper, to thrive, people needed more than just food and shelter. They had to live without throwing

away their dreams and aspirations. They needed hope.

“I doubt this is ideal for you,” Rishe said. “But it’s all I can offer at this time.”

“Actually, I think this is a pretty good plan. You’re excellent at picking up on my own thoughts and beliefs. I’ve rather enjoyed this.” Tully’s look of glazed boredom had become one of delight. “However, *Miss Rishe*, you’ve still got much to learn.”

She recognized that smile. It was how he’d look at her back in her first life whenever she made a mistake.

“Remember what I told you before? You conduct yourself too earnestly—you’re transparent. Someone unscrupulous could take advantage of that.”

“I...appreciate the warning,” Rishe said.

“I haven’t the faintest idea why, but clearly you want me and my company. And I’m planning on using you to the full extent of my ability.

Tully’s people gave him more exasperated looks. “C’mon, Boss. This is the crown princess you’re talking to here. Quit it.”

His lips curled, sly and savoring. “So, what will you do? I can poke a hundred holes in this deal you’re offering me. I bet you’d come up with something even better if I reject it.”

Rishe closed her eyes for a breath. “Oh? And I suppose you won’t allow me to take my business elsewhere.”

“See? You *do* understand me! Even though we’ve only spoken a few times.”

“I wanted to avoid this, but you’ve left me little choice.” Rishe turned over her final document.

“What have you got for me this—” Tully’s eyes went wide and his back straightened. “What the...?”

“What is it, Boss?”

Shock was written all over his face. His aloof affectation evaporated, panic threading his voice. “Miss Rishe, how the hell do you know about this?!”

“Apologies. I admit I took the liberty of investigating you in my own way.” The

truth was that Rishe had seen it with her very own eyes, but she couldn't say that. "As I have written here, I am currently in the process of cultivating some rare herbs. Together, they can be used to make a medicine that hails from the country of Renhua to the east."

The knights who accompanied Rishe to her work in the garden gave her wondering looks. Rishe nodded gravely. "Mr. Tully, do you recognize the symptoms of this disease?"

"This is what Aria is..." He trailed off.

Rishe knew Aria Tully very well. She was Kaine Tully's only living family member. Right about now, she would be a bright and happy ten-year-old girl. Her character was slightly more scrupulous than her older brother's, but she was no less curious. Fitting, for the namesake of the trading company. He loved her dearly, and that was why he was gathering information from every corner of the world.

"Exactly. This medicine will cure your sister's disease."

Aria had struggled with respiratory infections since she was very young. Rishe had seen it happen in her previous lives. Her older brother traveled the world, peddling his wares as he searched for a way to cure her.

Tully's breaths were ragged, his voice hoarse. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you know of Aria's illness. I speak to doctors wherever I go. But how do you know about herbal medicine from Renhua?"

The eastern country of Renhua had its own tradition of herbalism that went back centuries. Doctors from all over the world traveled there hoping to gain their knowledge, but it was fiercely guarded. Having spent a life working for Tully, Rishe knew he was among one of the supplicants denied access.

"The apothecary who served my family came from Renhua. She taught me herbalism." *That* specifically was a lie, but Rishe did know an herbalist from Renhua. Before meeting her, Rishe had been entirely self-taught; her education went in bounds after that. One of the things she'd learned was the medicine she was offering Tully now.

"I did a little bit of digging into Miss Aria's symptoms. If she takes this

medicine for a year, she will make a full recovery.”

“Why should I believe you?” Tully snorted. “You’re not a doctor *or* an apothecary.”

Rishe had anticipated this, so she’d taken measures a week ago. She turned her attention to Tully’s staff. “Gentlemen, what do you think? You’ve already had a sample.”

Tully’s men looked momentarily shocked. “Do you mean the stuff we took the morning after you drank us under the table?”

“Yes, that’s what I’m referring to.”

The night one week prior, when she’d followed his men to the inn and challenged them, knowing she would be the only one sitting sober when Tully arrived. On her way out, she had given Tully packets of medicine, saying: “When your employees wake up tomorrow, be sure to give them this.” It was, of course, a hangover cure.

“Well, when I woke up, I felt pretty bad... But the medicine helped, for sure!”

Rishe nodded. “It has a number of effects. It swiftly expels alcohol from your blood and reduces inflammation in the stomach. I made it myself.”

“You did?!” Tully’s staff stared at her with matched looks of shocked admiration.

Rishe hadn’t chosen a drinking game by chance. By giving them an opportunity to try her medicine in advance, she’d hoped to increase her credibility in Tully’s eyes. To convince him to take a chance on her.

I admit, I let myself slip into old habits back then, orchestrating things as I did. I fully admit my guilt. She turned back to Tully. “You’re right, in the end. I can’t prove to you this medicine will work. But isn’t a little hope better than no hope at all?”

Tully was silent, pressing a hand against his brow. “Become a merchant who can pick their clients. Offer values and products that can’t be found with anyone else—that’s what I say to my employs.”

Yes, I know. She had taken his lessons to heart.

Tully wore an ugly grin. “But now the tables are turned, eh, sweetheart?”

“Mr. Tully—”

“We were just bargaining whether I would pick you. But right now, you’re the one in the position to pick me.” Tully sat up tall, staring intensely at her. He was a prideful man, but he’d throw everything away for the sake of his beloved sister, even for an unsure bet. He was attempting to humble himself before Rishe. “Please. I’ll give you everything I own if that’s what it’ll take. So, please, give me—”

“I think you’ve misunderstood my intentions here,” Rishe interrupted. “I will give you the medicine’s recipe for free.”

“What?” Tully looked at her with disbelief.

“And of course, I will give you the herbs required to make it. There need not be any contracts or negotiations involved, don’t worry about that at all.”

“Are you kidding me? I was just slithering out of our deal! You’re telling me this isn’t your trump card?”

“I am using it as a trump card,” Rishe said. “But I would never stoop so low as to hold your sister’s health hostage.”

Tully blinked, thrown completely off, as she went on, “There is, however, something I would like you to understand. Everyone in the slums cares just as much for their families as you do for yours. There are countless people out there sacrificing their own dreams to ensure that their own younger siblings don’t end up sick or malnourished.” Rishe clenched both fists as she recalled her conversation with Elsie. “I believe that it is the country’s duty to assist them, but I am just a princess. I am powerless to change anything. What I proposed to you is my counter-method, however crude.”

If she were Tully, she would have come up with far broader ventures. If she were Arnold, she’d be able to enact political change. But she was just Princess Rishe—nearly, anyway—with barely any influence to speak of.

“I do not see this as turning the tables on you, Mr. Tully.” Rishe stood and offered him a deep bow. “I simply ask you to consider what I’ve said.”

Silence stretched inside the parlor. Rishe braced herself to be told how naive she was. If this were her previous life as his underling, he never would've allowed her to stake out on her own.

Tully stood from his chair. "You shouldn't be the one bowing to *me*, my lady." He dropped to his knees on the floor.

"Mr. Tully?! What are you—"

"I won't insult you by asking you to forgive my insolence." He blew out a breath. "It seems that I am the one who has much to learn."

"Er, there's truly no need!" Rishe found the sight of her former boss genuflecting to her to be awkward in the extreme.

"A merchant's job is to enrich everyone," Tully said, stubbornly staying on his knees. "And by everyone, I mean the merchant who receives the money, the artisan who makes the product—even the customer who felt the urge to spend their money on something they wanted. Somehow, while I was running my mouth, I managed to forget that."

Rishe was shocked by his words.

"I never considered poor citizens as customers. To be frank...I never considered them at all. Never gave them a second thought. But you're right... Many children are just like my sister." He looked up at Rishe. "Your deal to enrich the many rather than the few is admirable and valuable. My sister's medicine aside, I'm ashamed of my own selfish arrogance."

"Does that mean..."

He nodded and, with all the reverence of a knight pledging himself to his lord, said: "I swear it on my name as Kaine Tully—the Aria Trading Company will do business with you, my lady, in whatever way you see fit."

A wave of relief swept over Rishe, so intense it left her feeling weak. "Thank you."

Rishe was pleased by how things ended, and she stayed behind in the parlor after Tully and his staff left, thinking.

I've secured a route for stockpiling goods. I sure am glad I managed to develop a prototype in time. Also, my herb garden is thriving, and the maids are progressing in their studies. It's time to begin the next steps.

Suddenly, she felt a throbbing pain in her forehead. *The medicine's worn off, I see.*

Taking care of the field, teaching the maids, making ingredients, working on developing the product—she didn't have nearly enough hours in the day, and she'd been pushing herself too hard. She'd spent all the previous night preparing for today's negotiation, forgoing sleep, stretching her body to its limit.

I don't have the endurance built up for this lifestyle.

She performed a self-examination, making sure she didn't have a cold she could spread, and concluded it was probably just exhaustion. She'd recover with rest.

But there's one last thing I need to finish up, she thought as her guards returned from escorting Tully out. "We apologize for keeping you waiting, my lady. We shall escort you back to your chambers now."

Rishe smiled, trying to mask her fatigue. "Thank you."

"My lady? Are you well?"

Rishe blinked. Her vision wavered. With her medicine wearing off, she suddenly found herself unable to rise from her chair. "Don't fret. Just...would someone summon Elsie for me?"

Sensing that something was wrong, a guard made haste to do her bidding.

"This way, sir!" Rishe's guard guided Oliver, the crown prince's attendant, to the parlor.

"How is her condition?"

"She looked pale, as if just sitting up was difficult for her. My partner Kamil is looking after her right now."

“Who else knows of this?” Oliver demanded.

“Lady Rishe’s maid, at her request. No one else.”

“Good.”

Arnold’s standing orders were that any unforeseen circumstances involving Rishe should be dealt with discreetly, with as few people involved as possible, to avoid rumors spreading throughout the imperial palace.

Especially with Prince Theodore sticking his nose in, Oliver thought. *What a mess.*

They needed to move Rishe stealthily and summon a trusted doctor. Oliver was working out the logistics of this as they arrived in the parlor.

“Lady Rishe, how are—” Oliver’s voice died in his throat. The guard’s eyes went wide as he looked into the room.

The parlor was empty. Kamil, Elsie, and the unconscious Rishe were gone.

“Sir, what do we do, what do we—”

Oliver put a placating hand on the guard’s arm. “I will report to His Highness at once. Do nothing until we know his orders.”

That evening, Prince Theodore strolled leisurely through the capital. He had snuck out of the castle grounds, as was his habit, with only a single guard. He wore a robe with a low hood and, at a glance, would never have been mistaken for royalty. The disguise was probably overkill, as only the emperor ever appeared in public. Very few citizens would know the young prince. He only needed to hide his face to slip in and out of the palace grounds.

Theodore turned into a narrow alley, a tight squeeze for the large-framed guard following behind. This was the sort of road people avoided even during the day. The light of Theodore’s lantern illuminated the shabby line of houses. He located the only one with lights on inside, walking up to knock on the door.

A voice called out in response, and Theodore’s guard stepped forward to open the door. Theodore walked in with a wave of greeting.

An elderly man with a hunch bowed deeply to him. “We have been awaiting your arrival, Your Highness.”

Theodore smiled, sitting down in a nearby chair. “Dominic. It’s been days. I heard that Lena had her child. What wonderful news.”

“All thanks to your support, Your Highness.”

“Don’t be so humble. I help out your people in the slums, and you return the favor. It’s a reciprocal relationship.” Theodore glanced meditatively at the ground. “I hear you have something for me. A certain...would-be crown princess.”

“Your wish is our command, Your Highness.”

The palace was continuing the pretense that all was well, but Arnold’s knights—aside from his personal guard—were unaccounted for. No doubt they were out searching. “Even now, my brother acts calm, but all the while he scrambles frantically for his missing fiancée.”

“What would you have us do with the girl?” Dominic asked. “We could kill her, of course, or sell her off. Your Highness’s wish is our command.”

“Such reliable service. How novel.” Theodore crossed his legs, propping his elbow on his knee so he could rest his chin in his hand. “There’s no rush. I need to congratulate you all on your flawlessly executed plan. I know it must have been difficult, grabbing her from her own palace drawing room.” His eyes searched out two figures standing in the shadows. “Elsie, Kamil. Thank you for your hard work.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” The petite girl and the broad knight bowed as one.

Theodore had known Elsie, Lady Rishe’s maid, and Kamil, one of her guards, for a very long time. The two of them were born and bred in the slums, growing up hungry.

“I wasn’t expecting a chance so soon,” said Elsie. “She worked herself to the point of collapse, so it was the perfect opportunity to steal her away.”

A pause. “I have already searched her person,” Kamil said. “She’s unarmed,

carrying nothing that would aid her in escape.”

“Such work ethic.” Theodore glanced at the maid. “Elsie, your complexion has improved so much. I’m glad you’ve been eating better.”

“It’s all thanks to you, Your Highness. You’re the one who referred me for the job.”

“No need to thank me. It was the perfect opportunity to get one of my supporters close to my brother’s fiancée, after all. You did an admirable job winning Rishe’s trust. I’m appreciative beyond words.” Theodore turned his attention to the knight. “Kamil, you’ve had your work cut out for you too. My future sister-in-law is such a busy bee.”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle. Acting as her guard was the perfect cover.”

Theodore laughed. “You weren’t so happy about it when my brother chose you for his personal guard and flatly refused when I asked for you instead,” he said, referring to an incident from a few years ago. Theodore’s terrific fuss at not being given his way was known far and wide, but the fact that the knight in question was one he’d brought up from the slums himself was not. “Who knew that having one of mine in my brother’s faction would be so useful?”

Theodore took out a leather bag full of gold coins and tossed it to them. Elsie and Kamil bowed as they accepted their payment.

“Thank you for everything thus far,” Theodore said as he let himself out into the fetid alley. “Keep up the good work.”

On his way back through the dark alley, a raggedly dressed boy scampered up. “Theo!”

“Hey, Wim. How’s the protection detail?”

“Good! I’m gonna keep Anna safe until Mom gets home from work!”

Theodore ruffled the boy’s hair, uncaring that it was matted and filthy. “What a good big brother you are. But it’s late enough that the mission should probably continue with the two of you tucked in for the night.”

“What? But I wanna stay up and see Mom when she gets home!” Wim wailed.

“It’s important for big brothers to make sure their little sisters get enough

rest, right?”

The boy’s face scrunched as he thought it over, before he nodded. “Okay. If you say so, then I’ll continue my duties from bed. Good night, Theo!”

“Good night. Sweet dreams.”

Theodore watched until the boy was out of sight. He shook his head ruefully. “A big brother’s job, eh? As if my brother would have ever done that for me.”

Theodore’s guard only responded with, “Your Highness.” At this, Theodore just shrugged.

He’d first visited these slums when he was very young, still holding hands with his mother. She’d done charity work here, in the imperial capital’s refuse pile, where people who didn’t matter were swallowed whole by debt and poverty.

“Brother sees me the same way he does the people who live here. He pretends to care because he can’t make me go away, but deep down, he doesn’t give a damn. That’s all I am to him. A duty.” Theodore kept his eyes on the pavement. “But now I’ve launched my counterattack, dear brother. I wonder how long I’ll have to wait for you to lavish me with your attention?”

In a small, dingy back room, Rishe fought to stay conscious.

As far as she could tell, she’d been brought to the outskirts of the capital and locked away in what appeared to be a storage room. There was a window, but she was on the third floor. She heard a few people moving on the other side of the door—most likely posted guards.

Rishe sat in one corner, fighting her wavering vision, sluggish body, and aching head.

At long last, a distraction arrived.

“Hey, Sister. How does it feel knowing you’ve been betrayed by your maid and guard?”

“Prince Theodore,” Rishe acknowledged, letting out a sigh. At last, the person she’d been waiting for made his entrance.

Theodore cheerfully smiled down at her from the door. “So sad, and after you trained that girl so lovingly. Elsie told me all about your scheme to get the maids doing their jobs faster. Even the officials are talking about you and your system. Apparently, it’s going to fix the palace’s staffing problem. My brother’s brilliant bride, here to solve all his administrative issues.” The smile dropped off his beautiful face. “You’re valuable to him.”

Her thoughts hazy, Rishe managed to ask, “Why do this?”

“To make my brother angry, of course.”

“That’s it?”

Theodore’s voice was unwavering as he spoke. “Skilled knights. Brilliant attendants. A bride who’s reforming the palace. My brother sees value in excellence and nothing else. I am so far beneath his notice that he doesn’t even bother to hate me. I decided to change that—I want him to loathe me down to his core.”

Rishe realized something then. Until now, she’d been operating under the assumption that Theodore schemed to undermine his brother because he disliked him. She’d made a terrible error.

“My brother doesn’t even look at me, you know?” Theodore said, chuckling. “No matter what I do, he won’t give me the time of day. He only bothered to acknowledge I was alive when I approached you. I’d far rather be looked at as an annoyance than nothing at all!” Theodore’s whole body was quivering, not out of fear but excitement. “While he’s mad at me, he’s thinking of me! It’s such a relief! Knowing that he considers me, even a little!”

Rishe watched his fuzzy figure from her seat on the floor as he continued to laugh.

Fighting through her nausea and headache, Rishe smiled at him. “You’re lying.”

“What?” Theodore’s face twisted so briefly that Rishe would have missed it if she hadn’t been watching closely. “You’re just angry I captured you. It’s not very becoming, Sister.”

“Then won’t you deign to tell your poor, defenseless hostage why the two of

you hate each other so very much?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“You made it my business,” Rishe said, “when you dragged to me into your feud.”

Theodore stuck out his lip petulantly, like a child. “Fine. Whatever. Remember how I told you my brother killed our mother? Well, he did it because she tried to kill him first.”

Rishe recalled the scars on the nape of Arnold’s neck, numerous and at least a decade old.

“She hated my brother as much as she hated my father. And Brother hated her in return. He dreamed of ending her life.”

Rishe listened in silence.

“I bet he’ll kill Father someday too. And when he does, being crown prince won’t save him—he’ll be a traitor, and they’ll execute him. There will be no escape.” Theodore’s voice was light, unknowing of the prescience of his joke. “Our family is a mess because our father treats us like objects. Movable game pieces. And because my brother has severed all contact with his siblings, my sisters live elsewhere, on his orders.”

“Why did Prince Arnold hate your mother so much he wanted to kill her?”

Theodore shrugged. “I assume it’s because she tried to kill him first. It’s only normal to loathe someone like that.”

Rishe had thought he’d answer that way, but she wasn’t sure she agreed. To her eyes, Arnold wouldn’t hold a grudge like that, or swear a vendetta. But trying to sort any of this out right now was impossible—she was too ill to even think.

“And now you know. Satisfied?”

“Yes. Very.” Rishe mustered all her strength to smile at Theodore. “You want to be close with Prince Arnold.”

“Wh—” Theodore’s blue eyes, so like his brother’s, went wide as saucers.

“You spoke about Arnold differently this time. When you told me about him in the chapel, you made him out to be a monster.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Theodore turned his back on Rishe. “Enough of this nonsense. I’m going to go play with my brother now, so you be a good girl while I’m gone. I’ve posted guards at the door; you won’t get far if you try to escape. Bye.”

He shut the door behind him, throwing the lock. After his footsteps faded away, Rishe could still hear the presence of people outside in the hall. She let out a deep sigh and turned to a box in the corner of the room, drawing out thick winter curtains. Delighted, she laid them on the floor and curled up on top of them. Not luxurious by any stretch, but still far more comfortable than sleeping rough when she was a knight. And more importantly...

At last, I can sleep!

She’d been fighting to stay awake before Theodore arrived—now that they’d spoken, she had no reason to bother. The headache and nausea were bad enough, but above all else, she was tired. So tired her whole body ached.

Rishe closed her eyes and fell asleep for just over an hour. It was a short nap, but it refreshed her mind. She hadn’t completely recovered, of course, but she felt much better than she had before she fainted. As she stirred, she yawned.

Hmm, I think I still have... Yes!

She pulled out a hidden vial of medicine, enduring its bitter taste as she gulped it down. It was a temporary measure, but once it kicked in, she’d have more options open to her. Next, she smoothly rolled up the hem of her dress, retrieving the dagger she had fastened to her thigh with a ribbon.

This is a good-quality knife. Elsie brought it to me from the slums—Prince Theodore must be their supplier. Rishe pulled two gold hairpins from her hair. Accessories on most days, lockpicks on special occasions.

I’ll have to thank Elsie and Kamil for their help later. They had, after all, been the ones to supply her the information on Theodore.

Dagger and her makeshift lockpicks in hand, Rishe stood up.

She'd confirmed before Theodore's arrival that the lock had been tampered with, destroyed from the inside. Normally that would mean the door couldn't be opened from here, but Rishe could deal with that.

I think it should be around here.

She knelt before the door, locating a small pinhole underneath the doorknob—a fail-safe in case the internal lock was broken. As she probed around with the golden pins, she went over her next moves. *I hope Elsie and Kamil are okay. They did just betray Prince Theodore, and the people around here adore him.*

Her maid had been working for Theodore all along.

Rishe had realized the possibility a few days ago when she'd received his letter. The false missive had been slid in under the crack of her door, which could only be done by someone with permission to enter the detached wing. At present, only Rishe, her maids, and her guards had that.

The night Arnold visited her, word had spread quickly. Clearly, comings and goings were watched, and Rishe learned that no one unknown had been seen. Which meant the person who delivered the letter was a maid or a knight. The knights were unlikely; they had been with her when the letter was dropped off.

That only left a maid.

Perhaps Theodore hadn't bothered to explain himself, just given the order. He had also most likely ordered silence—no mention at all that he had ever drafted a letter to the crown princess.

Reluctantly, Rishe began investigating her maids during the hours she spent making the nail polish. She looked at their backgrounds, searching for criminal records of anyone close to them. Among her maids, just one of them had any sort of shady history: Elsie.

All the new maids were from poor families, but Elsie was the only one who had grown up in the slums. Her character reference for her job had been offered by a church in the district. Nothing so strange in a poor girl being sponsored by a charity, but something about it still felt off to Rishe.

She needed answers; she needed proof. Thus, she'd asked the knights to summon her when she felt unwell. This would be the moment Elsie would show her hand. But the second Elsie came into the parlor, she burst into tears, saying, "Please don't worry, my lady. I'll protect you no matter what happens, I promise. I promise."

Her small body trembled as she resolved herself to betray her patron.

What Rishe had not been anticipating was a knight to say much the same thing. "Lady Rishe, I swear I will protect you as well. I was truly touched by your plan to help the slums. Elsie and I will deliver you to a doctor."

He was one of the knights who had been paralyzed by poison during the bandit attack on their journey to Galkhein. Rishe knew from Arnold that he was from the slums and that he had struggled night and day to become a knight.

"Elsie, I don't care what kind of punishment he might inflict on us—we shall save Lady Rishe."

"Yes. Stay here, my lady. We'll—"

"No, wait. I have a request," Rishe cut in. "If Prince Theodore has ordered you to do something to me, I want you to do it. Obey him."

"Why?!" they asked in tandem.

Their guilty shock told Rishe everything she needed to know. "Were you given any instructions, Elsie?"

"We were ordered to watch for a chance to take you captive, without any harm coming to you."

A strange order, Rishe thought then.

"I'm so sorry, my lady. Punish me any way you see fit."

"My lady! I cannot say the same for myself, but Elsie has done no wrong. Due to her situation at home, she cannot afford to disobey Prince Theodore's commands." Kamil wore a pained look on his face. "Prince Theodore personally supports the slums, and everyone who lives there would likely do whatever it was he asked of them. To go against his orders is to go against the interests of your own friends and family—you'd be shunned. Elsie has nowhere to go."

“But, Kamil, that goes for you as well!” Elsie cried.

“I’m a knight, I no longer live in that district. And obeying this particular order would be a serious crime against our future princess.”

Rishe listened to their exchange. “We should continue this conversation later. For now, let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To imprison me. Like Prince Theodore ordered.”

Elsie and Kamil stared at her.

Blinking against her headache, Rishe turned over a paper she had used during her negotiations with Tully and wrote: *I have gone to continue a discussion we began in the chapel.*

Arnold was the only one who could interpret this. It had only been a week ago, and it would still be fresh in his memory. After that, Elsie and Kamil snuck Rishe out of the palace and locked her up in this building on the outskirts.

Prince Arnold should know from that letter that I left the palace of my own free will. Meanwhile, Prince Theodore believes he’s successfully captured me. Neither of them will find fault with Elsie or Kamil.

Back in the present, she felt one of the hairpins come up against something heavy. She flipped it up and heard a click. Rishe stood, easing the door open, pausing to listen to the men talking on the other side.

“Does one noblewoman really merit this heavy guard? It’s Prince Theodore’s orders, but surely three of us would suffice.”

Rishe steadied her breathing, taking care so that the men wouldn’t notice her.

“That lady knows how to use a sword. I think Prince Theo’s more concerned about *us* than her.”

“She can’t do anything through a locked door! There’s five of us here, six on the second floor, and ten more posted outside, no? That’s way too many people if you—agh!”

Rishe threw the door open and kicked the man behind the knees.

The man lost his balance, falling just as Rishe swung her sheathed dagger against his neck. With a short grunt, the man collapsed, unconscious.

“Wh-what the?! What’s going on?!”

“Hey, the woman got out!”

“But that’s impossible! We locked—”

“Shut up and grab her! He ordered us to be gentle, but we have no choice—we gotta tie her up!”

Rishe bent back and grabbed the hand grasping for her collar. She jabbed an elbow into the pit of the guard’s stomach. He let out a croak like a dying frog, staggering back several steps.

“Urgh...”

Weak. Rishe analyzed her own strike and took a step back to gain some ground. Her current body simply wasn’t strong enough. Any martial arts she did would have to use the enemy’s speed and power against them.

Emboldened by her hesitation, the men drew their swords. Quite an escalation, considering she’d kept hers sheathed.

“Let me pass,” she said.

“Be careful!” one of the guards warned. “This lady’s tougher than she looks!”

“Don’t be stupid,” snapped another. “It’s four against one! She can’t fight us all at once.”

Rishe’s request was polite, but they appeared unwilling to accede to it. On the contrary, they were planning a coordinated attack. A stupid strategy in such a narrow hallway.

Rishe stood at the ready, parrying a swing from her right. He was being incautious, and a hit in just the right place unarmed him, his sword flying and sinking into the wood of the door. The man was overcome with shock. Rishe used that opening to hit him with the pommel of her dagger.

“Khrgh!”

Rishe pushed him away, dodging the other three. She waited for an opening and drove herself against the man's chest, slicing down his face with her still-sheathed dagger. The area between the eyebrows was a tender spot. A strong hit there could kill a man, but Rishe didn't need to worry about that with her current musculature. The guard didn't even scream before he thumped to the ground.

"What the hell is going on?! She's just some noblewoman with a couple of moves!"

"How dare you make fools of us!"

No sooner had she dodged one man's swing than another blade came at her from the other side.

Dual wielding! She blocked the blow with her dagger, her hand going numb, but it was nothing compared to Arnold's attack. Without a moment's delay, Rishe drew back her dagger, pivoting adroitly, putting the force from the rotation into her kick.

"Guh!"

She slammed the heel of her shoe into the man's face.

"Th-this can't be happening." The final man's voice trembled as he faced her.

Rishe paid him no heed, finally drawing her dagger from its sheath. The man squared up, still shaking with rage.

Rishe didn't point her dagger at the man. Instead, she grabbed at her dress and plunged the blade into the skirts, tearing a long slit into the side. Rishe stood before the astonished man and smiled. There. That should make movement easier.

"Let me make a suggestion," she said. "Give up now."

The man grunted. He was one of Theodore's soldiers—he couldn't disobey. She had no choice but to take care of him. Leaving him unconscious, she sighed.

He said that there's six on the second floor and ten more on the ground.

Rishe descended the stairs, leaving five fallen men in her wake.

Chapter 5

THEODORE CONFRONTED HIS BROTHER in a modest room on the outskirts of the capital.

The crown prince sat in a chair, chin propped on one hand. Theodore read no emotion in his face, but he still appeared to be in a bad mood.

“I’m so happy you came all the way here to see me,” Theodore welcomed his brother. Arnold said nothing.

Theodore did not allow this to dampen his high spirits. “And without any guards too! Such a delight, considering how you always ignore my invitations. How long has it been since we last sat down to talk like this? This might be the first time ever!” Theodore cackled loudly, and then his face twisted into a grimace. “I guess that means you must be doing this for her sake.”

Even saying the words made a hot pulse of rage streak through his chest.

Finally, Arnold spoke. “You’re wasting my time. Get on with it already.”

“Rude. Shouldn’t you be showing me some brotherly love?”

“Why would I do that? I have no reason to speak to you.”

Theodore tutted. “Don’t you understand you’re in no position to argue? I’ve abducted your favorite woman. I was expecting at least a smidgen of panic. Or don’t you care about her at all?”

He knew the answer, but he said it anyway. Anything to provoke his brother.

When I learned of his betrothal, I thought it a farce. That he’d done it on Father’s orders.

The emperor had been pushing his son toward a political marriage for months, ordering him to bring home a foreign princess. All royal marriages were coordinated political moves; Theodore’s late mother had been the princess of a once-thriving nation brought under Galkhein’s rule.

When word of Arnold journeying home with some random woman spread, Theodore naturally assumed the crown prince was just following orders. He’d

begun to rethink that, however, when a messenger arrived ahead of Arnold's return with orders for a cadre of maids to serve his fiancée.

Theodore took that opportunity to sneak Elsie in among the potential servants, learning that his brother planned to prepare the detached palace for his bride and move in with her when all was ready. This was not a man who was marrying a woman in name only.

I'm jealous of her. Of course I am.

He'd never received a moment of kindness from his brother. Arnold had even gone so far as to order Theodore to stay away from his bride, not even allowing him to greet her. When Theodore heard that she'd been allotted an herb garden, he'd wanted to trample it to death. He restrained his childish envy and managed to just take a nap instead.

He could use her. And he had. Finally, Arnold was here. Arnold was speaking to him.

"What you're doing is pointless," Arnold declared, his expression oddly cool for a man whose fiancée had been taken prisoner.

"Pointless?" Theodore snickered. "I know you view me as a stranger with no strategic value. But now you must acknowledge at least this: that I can hurt you."

He copied his brother's posture, propping up his chin in a mirror image. "As you well know, what I want is your throne—the seat of the crown prince."

Had his brother guessed that this was his price? Or was Theodore so irrelevant in his eyes he hadn't even bothered to wonder at his motives? Arnold's face revealed nothing.

He glared at me so coldly that night at the chapel. Why won't he do it again?

Arnold wouldn't give a damn about a challenge to his succession. Rishe was his only weakness, and Theodore held her life in his hands. He stood up, continuing his threats. "Are you listening? If you want your bride returned to you unharmed, you'll abdicate in my favor. Otherwise, I can't promise you her continued well-being."

He was met with silence.

“You care about her. You’re playing it cool, but I know you’re terrified.”

Theodore took a single step toward him.

“She means a lot to you, doesn’t she? Far more than the brother you loathe the sight of and the sisters you sent away! You cherish her, and you want her by your side. I completely understand that. I know you—I’ve been watching you for a long time.”

Another step. Theodore was inching closer than his brother had ever allowed him.

“And right now, the life of the woman you care so much about is in my hands. You’re very worried, aren’t you? You must be on pins and needles! The fact that you came here so late at night without an escort is proof of that!”

His vision wavered. He felt almost lightheaded as he stood over his brother, voice rising to a screech.

“C’mon, say something already! Admit I won this round! Say ‘well played, Theodore’ and give me your title!” Theodore smacked a hand against his chest. “That’s all I need! Give me this, and I’ll be happy for the rest of my life!”

A long silence hung between them. Then his brother finally said, “Theodore.”

Theodore was overjoyed to hear his brother say his name, but *still* there was nothing on his face. No fury or contempt—not even mild dislike.

Why not?

Arnold smiled slowly, leisurely, like he had all the time in the world. Certainly not like he felt threatened. “Very well, I’ll play along for the moment. You claim that you’ve locked her up somewhere. Tell me, is it a prison?”

“What?” Theodore snapped, annoyed. He wasn’t that stupid; he hadn’t put her in somewhere as mundane as a prison. The city prisons were under the jurisdiction of the knights—surely Arnold would have searched them all.

His brother already knew the answer, so why was he bothering to ask? Theodore replied snidely, “I put her in a cramped, dirty room. She won’t escape. It’s basically an isolated cell, locked from the outside.”

“My, so you *locked* it,” Arnold said. “What else?”

“I posted some ruffians to guard her. They’re armed. Her room is up high, so she can’t jump out of the window. If she tries to scream for help, the guards will silence her in an instant.”

“Oh, there’s even a window?”

Arnold’s arched tone just wound Theodore up further. “Did you hear a word I said? There’s no way she can jump from a window that high!”

“Is that what you think?”

“Yeah, it is. And even if she did somehow manage to get out, my guards will capture her.” He couldn’t believe he had to explain this; it was so obvious. Nevertheless, his brother showed no sign of losing his composure.

“Normally, I’d agree with you.”

What the heck was he talking about? Theodore’s irritation was beginning to shade over into anxiety. What if he’d made a miscalculation when choosing her as his hostage?

No way. It can’t be.

Theodore knew he’d interpreted his brother’s feelings correctly. He *did* care about Rishe—it was plain as day in his gaze when he looked at her. So why wasn’t he angry? Why wasn’t he looking at Theodore with hatred and showering him with scathing words?

“Maybe I’ll...cut off a finger,” Theodore mused. “Show you I mean business. It’s not too late for that, you know. The guards will hurt her on my command, I promise you that.”

“My foolish little brother.” Arnold smiled with disdain.

Theodore had just thrown everything he could to make Arnold react, but this wasn’t what he wanted. His brother was looking at him with pitying contempt for his foolishness, not because the capture of his bride had left him helpless.

“You already lost, Theodore. The second you thought you’d captured her, you’d already lost.”

“What?”

Arnold glanced at the door. “See? She’s decided to join us.”

“What the hell is wrong with you? You’re being absolutely ludicrous—”

The door flew open with a bang. Theodore let out a shout. That door was locked. He was sure of it. Nevertheless, it was standing open.

“No. No, that’s impossible.”

In the threshold stood a girl with coral-colored hair. She had a dagger in her hand and was spreading out the ragged skirts of her dress.

His brother’s fiancée—the beautiful Rishe—looked at him, smiled, and hooked a piece of hair behind her ear. “Good evening, Prince Theodore. I’m here to settle this.”

Theodore shrank back. “This can’t be happening!”

Don’t tell me Elsie was moved by her kindness?! But that still doesn’t make sense. I put Hugo and his men at the door. They would never betray me, or allow Elsie to either!

Rishe ignored his sputtering, her gaze shifting to the right. “Prince Arnold.”

It was almost awkward, the way she said his name. A furtiveness to her expression. Theodore knew these two hadn’t seen one another since that night in the chapel. He didn’t know what had happened between them, but Arnold was regarding her coolly.

“I’m sorry for my idiot brother ruining your night,” he said.

“Oh, it’s all right.”

“Theodore was just telling me about the room where he locked you up. Did you jump out the window? Or just make a hole in the wall?”

“I have no idea what you mean! I left through the door like any normal person would.”

Arnold laughed. “You left like ‘any normal person’ would leave a locked cell watched by armed guards.”

Rishe looked troubled but less nervous than before. Not that any of that

mattered to Theodore.

“Who the hell are you?!” He clenched his fists. “How did you get here? How did you escape?!”

“Prince Theodo—”

“Someone must have betrayed me. That’s the only explanation! What was the point of doing all that if—”

“Your Highness. With all due respect, I’d love to offer you a few words of advice.” Rische’s face had gone cold.

Theodore flinched away at her intensity. He couldn’t help it, even if she was only an ignorant noblewoman—someone the same age as him. “Advice?”

“First of all.” Rische put up a finger. “Don’t let a prisoner of war out of your sight. You mustn’t leave them alone, even in a locked room. If you can’t be there yourself, post guards inside the room with them. At least two.”

“Wh-what are you talking about? Prisoners of war?” he blurted. A normal noblewoman would never say something like this. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Second.” Rische raised another finger. “Always search your captive for weapons more than once. If you have an underling frisk a prisoner, you should do the final check yourself.”

Rische moved toward him, nonchalant, crowding Theodore up against the wall. She flipped her dagger from hand to hand. Where had she even gotten that?

“Honestly, you shouldn’t leave them clothed—strip them completely. That way they won’t be able to hide any weapons or tools to aid their escape. This is especially important if the prisoner is a woman. If she’s indecent, she’ll feel she can’t run away, and she’ll be afraid to try.” The words fell from her red lips with a casual air, as if this was only common sense.

She then held up three fingers. “Third. You neglected to bind my hands and feet. When you *do* bind a prisoner, make sure they’re in handcuffs and that the base of their thumbs is tied off with a durable rope. As for their ankles—I imagine this goes without saying, but it’s best to fasten them to a pillar or a

bed, something solid.”

Her long-lashed eyes pierced Theodore. Her face was as pretty as a doll’s but alight with something fierce and fearsome. He couldn’t look away.

“But even with all of that, it’s still half-hearted. Do you know how best to ensure someone can’t run away?” Rishe leaned in.

“H-how?”

“You break their arms and legs.”

Theodore swallowed hard. Was she serious? His back hit the wall, Rishe leaning in close as she said matter-of-factly, “Those three actions are a sure thing. Broken bones, secure bonds, everything confiscated. Oh! And always post guards in groups. That’s the only way to guarantee your prisoner won’t escape you. Or...probably won’t. You have to prepare for any eventuality.”

What in the world is wrong with this girl?!

Theodore recognized the look in her eyes. He would never forget it. He’d seen it in the eyes of wounded soldiers when he’d treated their injuries on the front lines.

“Escaped enemies will have information about your position and the makeup of your army. They will endanger you and your allies. Civilians. You must always do what is necessary to ensure a captive can’t slip your grasp.”

Oh, wait. I was wrong.

She had the eyes of a soldier standing on the battlefield, sword in hand. Just as he was sure of it, Rishe asserted, “That is what is required when you capture an enemy.”

A chill ran down Theodore’s spine.

Rishe, who had no idea what she was doing to him, smiled bashfully. “At least, that’s how I learned it from a book. You went too easy on me, considering you were trying to threaten Arnold with my well-being. You even told them not to be rough with me.”

“How—”

“I know, I know, I’m talking too much. But I still haven’t told you the most important thing. I will be keeping how I escaped a secret—oh!”

A big hand grabbed Rishe by the shoulder, pulling her backward. Behind her stood Theodore’s brother, looking consternated.

Rishe looked up at him. “Your Highness?”

“Why are you giving the person who captured you a flawless method of keeping someone restrained?” Arnold asked as he draped his jacket over Rishe’s shoulders.

That was when Theodore noticed that her dress wasn’t just ragged—it was torn all the way from waist to hem.

Rishe looked flustered. “Your Highness! You mustn’t! I’m fine; please keep your jacket on.”

“I’m not cold. You wear it.”

“But your scars...”

Before Rishe even spoke, Theodore’s gaze had locked on Arnold’s shoulders.

What are those wounds? On Arnold’s body were countless scars. They were old, but he could tell they had been deep. *When was he injured? I had no idea that happened to him. He must have been hiding it. But she knew.*

That was when Theodore understood. *She really is better than me.* He clenched his teeth. *He doesn’t tell me his secrets. He doesn’t trust me. I know that, and yet...I can’t help how I feel.*

He thought back to several years ago, when Galkhein was still at war. Theodore signed up as a battlefield medic, working at a first-aid station where the injured were transported. By mutual agreement of both sides, it was designated as a safe zone.

Someone attacked anyway. They were brigands, rather than soldiers. They’d looked feverish, intent—rendered destitute by the war. They’d shouted at the medics to hand over their medical supplies, valuables, and food, menacing them with blades.

Those who could flee did so, leaving the ruffians to target the most severely

wounded. Theodore had tried to run as well, but then he'd realized something. He recognized their attackers: they were men from the slums. The realization rooted him to the spot, and then he'd reflexively run to them.

Theodore had grown up ignored by his father and constantly compared to his prodigy brother. He knew these people. They'd smiled at him as he went about his charity work, the way his father never had. They'd worried for him in place of his late mother. They were dear to him. He refused to fight.

He might be injured. He might even lose his life. He squeezed his eyes shut, but the moment he'd feared never came. Instead, he had heard a hoarse scream.

When Theodore opened his eyes, he saw his brother, back to him, wielding his sword.

Brother...? He forced the word out around the fear.

His brother slowly turned. A crimson arc was painted across his face, arterial spray from the man whose throat he'd cut. Red droplets dripped down to the ground. The crown prince's expression didn't change as he surveyed the bodies at his feet. He wiped at the blood on his face with a cuff, careless.

For a moment, Theodore was sure his brother would kill him as well. After all, he could count on one hand the number of times they'd spoken in living memory. His beautiful, terrifying brother. The stranger.

Theodore knew of Arnold's achievements on the field, and of his cruel nature that didn't bother to distinguish between friend or foe. He was paralyzed with fear.

But after a moment, his brother withdrew his icy gaze and said, "You did well."

Huh? Theodore was dumbfounded, unable to comprehend what his brother could mean.

Arnold didn't meet his eyes. "Despite your trembling, you were right to protect our subjects. It's hardly a royal's job, but an admirable deed as a lord, nonetheless."

Theodore was at a loss for words.

“Next time, don’t risk your own life,” Arnold said gently. “But you should be proud of how quickly you acted.”

Arnold had been watching him. He had been watching Theodore, the child who couldn’t wield a sword and could only assist in the camp. It made him indescribably happy to know this.

Back in the present, Theodore glared at Rishe, who wore his brother’s black jacket on top of her dress. *I adore my brother. And that’s why I cannot permit this. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, but if I must...I don’t care. I’ll die. I’ll die if it will hurt him. I’ll kill her. I’ll kill her and then my brother will hate me—*

“Trying to kill me would be an exercise in futility,” Rishe said.

He flinched. Was she reading his mind? Under normal circumstances, he could have hidden his disquiet, but his mind felt storm-tossed. Her manipulations had left him utterly lost.

“I know I said I was here to settle this, but I’m not going to fight you,” she added. “I entreat you to tell me your goal.”

Theodore scowled. “Isn’t it obvious? I want to be the next emperor. Why else do princes fight?”

Rishe shook her head. “I don’t think that’s true. I beg you to take this chance to explain yourself to us both.”

He would never tell her. He refused to tell her. However, Theodore’s determination was immediately overruled.

“Your true objective is to wear the stigma of a heinous criminal,” Rishe guessed. “You want people to believe you a usurper. You don’t actually want the throne.”

Arnold frowned. Theodore was even more surprised. *How does she know?* He nearly blurted the question out loud, but he didn’t dare let his brother hear it.

“What are you talking about?” he snapped. “Nobody commits crimes simply to become a criminal.”

“Well, I suppose calling it your ‘true’ objective is misleading. But let’s assume

your goal is what happens after you are named an enemy of the state.” It had to be just a random guess, but Rishe sounded so sure of herself. “I couldn’t figure it out for the longest time. Why would you go after me of all people? But this theory explains that, and everything else.”

“How? I told you already—I did it to hurt my brother.” Theodore forced a smile. “You’re just dismissed as a hostage inside the palace, but the nation will celebrate you as the crown prince’s bride. And my brother’s reputation would be ruined if he failed to protect you.” Theodore didn’t dare look at Arnold; he couldn’t risk him seeing how shaken he was. “You were far more useful than I could ever have predicted. That’s why I chose now to make my move. I was going to threaten Arnold with your safety and force him to give up his line in the succession!”

“To outsiders, my only value is that I’m the crown prince’s fiancée. His position matters, and nothing more.”

“I suppose.”

“You didn’t possibly think it would work, did you?” Rishe asked. “Using me as a means to force His Highness to hand over his title?”

Her words were humble, but Rishe stood confidently. It didn’t seem to bother her at all that other people saw her as worthless.

“I can say definitively that there was very little value in having me abducted. You’re not stupid. Why did you bother? Was it just to annoy everyone?”

“No,” Theodore said, averting his eyes from Rishe.

“You’ve had next to no official duties as the second prince for the past few years, is that right?”

Rishe was right, much as he wanted to scoff. Theodore had resigned from his professional duties as an imperial prince. Everyone in the palace knew it *and* that it was by his own choice. His every action was to cultivate a wild and uncontrolled persona so that when people spoke of him, they would say, “There goes the second prince, gallivanting around and sleeping in weird places again!”

“I’ve had a look at the records. You stopped doing charity work in the slums

two years ago. You've been going there to help out since you were very young. Why stop?"

Theodore shrugged. "I lost interest in it. Charity work is boring. I'd rather nap or do anything else."

"Another lie," said Rishe. "You haven't ever stopped. I saw no traces of public funds being moved—I assume you've used your own."

How many records did she read?!

To a certain extent, records were available to the public in the palace library. They contained what could be called history books at this point, all the way to very recent public finances. Anyone who worked in the palace could read them. But they only listed superficial information. Perhaps one could draw the conclusions Rishe had through careful scrutiny, but not if you didn't know what you were looking for.

Just who in the world is this woman?!

Rishe continued, "You've made every effort to support the people of the slums; you are on very amicable terms. Why, I hear you even took care of an orphan while they were sick—never leaving their side for a moment, holding their hand. Once, you arranged a doctor for a woman who had no one to support her during childbirth, staying with her to offer words of encouragement. You nap all day because you are out all night."

It almost sounded like she had seen him do this for herself.

Theodore started laughing. "Ha ha ha! You make me out to be quite the saint. But service works both ways—I helped them so they would help me."

"Those thugs did indeed seem to be under your control."

"They're willing to do anything—*anything*—for money. I courted them to use them, that's it!"

"They're under your protection, then," said Rishe. "You take the criminally desperate under your wing so they'll have food to eat tomorrow. Am I getting that right?"

Theodore made a strangled noise in his throat.

Rishe continued to gaze at him. “You have affection for the people in the slums. You wish to save them, but you know you lack the power. What I don’t understand is why you feel like you have to do it under the table. Why shirk your duties?”

“Because.” Theodore’s voice stuck. His heart was beating painfully. His brother’s gaze scared him—was Arnold becoming aware of his plot? Theodore couldn’t bear to look at him.

“I don’t think you want to be a prince,” Rishe went on. “I think you’d prefer to abdicate. Or rather...force yourself from the succession with a desperate plot to kill your brother’s fiancée.”

“As if. I just want what’s his.”

“If that were true, you’d go after Prince Arnold directly, not through me. You must have had countless chances before I arrived.” Theodore sucked in a breath. Rishe ignored him. “But you never tried to hurt him, did you? I believe that everything you do, every choice you make, is for your brother’s sak—”

“No.” The ground seemed to writhe and contort beneath his feet. His heart pounded in his chest, dizziness crowding his mind. Theodore screamed, the world bucking under him. “That’s not true! No, no, no, you’re wrong! Why do you keep talking?!”

All Theodore could do was deny everything she said. He didn’t care if Arnold was here—he couldn’t let her be right. “Fine, if you have to know! I want my brother to hate me! I want him to shun me, to loathe me, to get rid of me! If he can’t accept me like he’s accepted you, then I’d rather just die!”

“Prince Theodore.”

“When he looks at me in anger, I’m so happy. I delight in his disdain! That’s why I did this. That’s all!”

“Your Highness.”

“Shut up!”

Rishe’s voice was repulsively gentle. “What are you afraid of?”

What kind of question is that? It’s like she thinks she’s on my side.

Rishe was looking at him in puzzlement, brows pinched. Slowly, she said, "Perhaps you and I fear the same future."

He couldn't imagine this woman fearing anything. "What?"

"Rishe."

Theodore stiffened at the sound of his brother's voice.

"That's enough. Don't say anything else."

"But Your Highness—"

"I told you not to speak to him," Arnold said.

A bead of sweat ran down Theodore's neck. Nerves crowded his throat, and stinging pain writhed in his chest.

"Your Highness, wait," Rishe said urgently. "I need to understand."

"It doesn't matter. He'll just lie to you." Theodore winced at the apathy in Arnold's voice, though it didn't come as a surprise.

Did she truly work it all out?

He was paralyzed, his brother's voice driving in the knife and twisting. "I don't care what he wants—it doesn't concern me."

Theodore made a choked noise and bolted for the door.

"Prince Theodore!"

Black night crowded the window. The echoes of Theodore's footsteps grew gradually distant.

Rishe rounded on Arnold. "Why are you doing this? Why do you keep pushing him away?"

Arnold looked at her as if all this was stupid. "Didn't I tell you? I don't care about him."

"Your Highness."

"Don't worry. I'll send him away if he tries anything else," Arnold said. "He can live elsewhere, like my sisters."

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” He knew that, which meant he was stonewalling.

I won’t let you get away.

Rishe understood that Arnold’s decisions were momentous. One day, he would influence the whole world. He would go to war with every nation, trampling them down and consuming them with overwhelming might. In her past six lives, there had not been a single person who didn’t know his name. By the same token, it was unlikely to the extreme that she’d *never* heard the name of his little brother, Theodore Auguste Hein.

She hadn’t thought it unusual at first. Court intrigue wasn’t widely circulated into the international sphere—at most there would be rumors. It wouldn’t be that unusual for a mere merchant or apothecary to never hear them. But now she was sure that couldn’t possibly apply to Theodore without his active attempt to keep himself off the world stage. Coupled with this night’s strange performance, it was obvious.

“Your brother is trying to erase himself from Galkhein’s future. He considers that a greater priority than the people of the slums. And I’m pretty sure it’s because of you, Your Highness.”

It had to be. Theodore prioritized Arnold above all else.

“So what?”

“Remember how you said the other day that I don’t need to be resolute in becoming your wife?” Saying it out loud made her heart hurt. Curious, that. “I have been mulling over what you meant ever since. One of my guesses is directly tied to Prince Theodore’s behavior.”

Her first idea was that he meant they’d be divorced at some point, but if not...

Arnold was telling her that he already had plans to kill his father in three years and start the war. And if Theodore knew about this plan, if he guessed what his brother intended to do...

“You’re planning to completely destroy everything, aren’t you?” Rishe asked. “You’re going to discard your future.”

Arnold stared at her with cold eyes.

“That’s what Prince Theodore fears, isn’t it? And that’s why he’s behaving like a willful child with no aptitude for leadership. He doesn’t want you to leave him the throne.” When Arnold said nothing, she prodded, “Well?”

Rishe was taking a gamble. She needed to know whether the cruel Emperor Arnold Hein existed yet, somewhere inside him.

Just let me in, just the smallest bit. I can still change the future.

Arnold possessed compassion like any decent person. Rishe fully believed he did not intend to start a war. She watched him unwaveringly, waiting for him to answer.

Arnold was silent for what felt like eons before he said, “Oh, I understand now.”

There was no trace of anger in his voice. Relief flooded Rishe—until she saw Arnold’s expression. She gasped.

“I’m sure of it.” He gave her a challenging grin. A dark, chilling glint grew in his eyes. It made Rishe shiver.

What’s that supposed to mean? This was not the response Rishe was expecting. Not that provocative grin, not that cold look, nor those words.

“You know...” He smiled at her bewilderment. “You’re adorable.”

“What?!”

“I know being unsure of my intentions is distressing you,” Arnold said. “But you don’t need to know. Feel free to continue theorizing, though.”

So, Arnold refused to reveal anything to Rishe. Perhaps it had been naive of her to imagine he ever would. She pursed her lips, thinking. Over the past few weeks living in the palace, she’d truly thought she was coming to know him.

I’ve been arrogant. I don’t know him at all.

Arnold’s smile was gone, replaced with that bored, blank look. “I’ll say it again: just ignore Theodore.”

“But—”

“As for what you were saying—you’re right that I’m laying plans for the event of my death. That’s only what’s expected of me. I can’t make policies that can be undone just because I pass away.”

He was denying Rishe’s conjecture. With her current hand, Rishe couldn’t refute him.

“Perhaps Theodore has read my actions wrong,” he went on. “But he’s a fool. This was a truly ridiculous gambit for a prince.” Then, in a considerably harsher tone: “My brother shouldn’t associate with someone like me.”

Rishe gawked at him in astonishment.

Was this *finally* a glimpse into why Arnold kept his brother at a distance? Why he refused to interact with him, turned around when he saw him coming?

“You really do love him.”

“What?” Arnold knit his brows, but he didn’t correct her. If he were truly apathetic, he wouldn’t have said something like that.

“Your Highness, have you ever heard the saying ‘If you love somebody, set them free’? Constant guidance and assistance can be detrimental rather than helpful.” Something else Rishe could claim she read in a book, when in reality a fellow knight had once told her that, smiling ruefully as he spoke. “Perhaps that’s why you keep him at a distance.”

“Interesting. Do you honestly believe that?”

“I do. I don’t know where you draw your lines, nor do I understand your tactics. But I know for certain that you are not made of stone.”

His rebuke had made her falter, but she was not yet at the point where she would fully discard her conclusions. Despite what she knew of the future him—the monster and the warmonger. Rishe now knew that he was human.

“Your Highness, may I ask... You appear to be preparing for a future where you yourself are out of the picture, but have you ever considered the reverse?”

“The reverse?”

“A future without Prince Theodore. You can’t predict when someone will die.”

Rishe had no idea what would happen to Theodore within the next five years. Perhaps in his other lives, he had merely continued down his path of obscurity. But what if he had launched a rebellion against Arnold and been punished accordingly?

It was not outside the realm of possibility that his brother had killed him.

Rishe gazed steadily into Arnold's eyes. "I urge you to live your life without regrets, that's all."

That was how Rishe was trying to live her own life, even if she did end up dying in five years. And if this loop was the one where she finally broke the cycle, her final chance...well, she wouldn't regret that, either. So that was what she said to him.

"I am going to strive to live this life as your wife without any regrets." Rishe turned her back on Arnold and left him. Theodore's footsteps had been heading up the stairs rather than outside—she was sure of it.

In the now-empty room, Arnold muttered, "Damn it all."

Rishe headed up the stairs in pursuit of Theodore. This building appeared to have once been an inn, and she sensed no one else inside but the three of them. They were on the third floor—Theodore seemed to be on the fourth and still climbing. Catching up, Rishe found the doors to the roof left open.

She stepped out into what once must have been a space for hanging laundry. She pictured the tableau of dozens of sheets softly fluttering in the wind.

Tonight, all was silent. Theodore stood under the spill of a starry sky.

"Prince Theodore?"

He flinched like a scolded child, then turned back to her with a pout. "Oh, do you have another lecture prepared? Perhaps on running away? Should I have run down and out instead of up?"

"I know you weren't trying to run away." If he wanted to escape, he would have just left.

Theodore huffed. "I wanted to speak without my brother present. I've

shamed myself enough as it is.”

The prince strode over to the roof’s edge, propping himself up against the railing. His eyes were wide and earnest. Gone was the petulant look of a boy intent on dodging his truths.

“You know, my brother doesn’t ever take credit for the brilliant policy changes he makes to improve our country.” Theodore smiled. “Eventually the citizens find out, though. But they never say. Or they credit our father.” His sleek hair fluttered in the wind. “On the other hand, there’s an unnatural number of rumors about my brother. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“About how cruel he was during the war?”

“Exactly,” Theodore said. “You’re from another country—you’ll have heard all about it. Why do you think the crown prince of the victorious nation is infamous everywhere?”

The answer he was looking for was obvious. “Because Prince Arnold himself intended for such rumors to spread.”

Theodore nodded. “That’s what I think too. He hides his meritorious deeds and spreads the contemptible. He’s ruining his own reputation. I can’t imagine he intends to participate in politics for much longer. And there’s more.” He slowly shut his eyes. “He has no attachment to his position as crown prince. He’s arranging his affairs so that he can disappear whenever he wants to. I know I’m right—I’ve watched him for so long.”

Rishe said nothing.

“I don’t know the next phase of his plans, but we can’t let him just disappear. He’s too important. Don’t you agree?”

Theodore had no idea what kind of future Arnold would choose. He had no way of knowing that Arnold wasn’t planning to step down from politics—he was going to incite a massacre. But Theodore’s sense of impending crisis was spot-on.

“Everything I’ve done has mimicked his moves,” Theodore said. “If he plans to entrust the nation to me and then disappear, then I’ll disappear first. I’ll save him from his own stupidity.” He gazed at Rishe with the eyes that matched his

brother's, then smiled gently. "This is the only kindness I can offer him."

Rishe had so many things she wanted to share. And to ask. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because just now you said that we're afraid of the same thing. Assuming you've figured out what I'm thinking, you're afraid of him disappearing too. I suppose that makes sense. Your position as his wife would be in jeopardy if something happened to him."

On the contrary, but Rishe kept that to herself. She couldn't tell him she knew his brother would kill her in five years.

"I thought it would be worth confirming your fears." His gaze went flinty. "Maybe I could finally frighten you off."

Another roundabout motive. This was getting annoying. Rishe wished these brothers would tone down the emotional manipulation.

"Don't look at me like that. You stole my beloved brother from me. I'm allowed my revenge. Not that he was ever very brotherly to me. But I'll still be gratified if this leaves you hopeless of ever preventing the future you fear."

"May I get a word in?" Rishe asked, just as a strong gust of wind blew across the rooftop. She clutched Arnold's jacket to her shoulders so it wouldn't fly away. "I won't be afraid of the future anymore."

Theodore looked at her with surprise. Rishe felt as if the ground were contorting under her feet.

The medicine's wearing off. I just need a little bit longer.

"Your brother must be planning something momentous. I intend to use all my power and every means at my disposal to stop him." She took a deep breath and balanced herself, trying not to wobble. "I won't hesitate. I will take all the help I can get, no matter what debts I incur. One can't be picky when faced with an opponent like him." She pierced him with her gaze. "Naturally, that includes you."

"Me?" Theodore swiftly covered his confusion with a sneer. "Such confidence. My brother truly chose well. But I don't think you'll be able to stop him. Nothing

I say will influence him. The most I can do is obstruct his plans.”

“That’s what you’ve been doing for the past two years, am I right? Putting your own position at risk, dirtying your hands. But if you truly wish to help your brother, I suggest focusing on your own life. On what makes you happy.”

“What?” This time Theodore couldn’t downplay the bafflement. “Why is my happiness related to his future?”

“Prince Arnold would not wish for a future in which you were unhappy.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Of course it does,” Rishe said. “You’re the only brother he has.”

Theodore stared at her.

“Why do you think Prince Arnold came here alone in the middle of the night?”

“To save you. Obviously.”

“His Highness knows I wouldn’t go quietly. And that I can save myself.”

And he knew that Theodore wouldn’t treat Rishe cruelly.

“If you had been anyone else, I am sure Prince Arnold wouldn’t have come. He’s the crown prince—he can’t rashly follow the directions of kidnappers. He came here because it was a demand from his little brother, nothing more.”

“Stop it. I don’t need to hear this from you,” Prince Theodore said, voice strangled. “Are you trying to say that he loves me? That’s ridiculous. I’ve learned not to hope for such things.”

“Prince Theodore—”

“He doesn’t spare me a single thought. Even our father hates me. I’ve done nothing to earn his respect. But it’s fine.” Theodore sighed and smiled. “Brother saved me once. I owe him my life. I doubt he even remembers it.” He looked over his shoulder, gazing beyond the railing. “It’s my own choice what I do with my life.”

Rishe made a questioning noise.

“I should have skipped the schemes and done this sooner. I can’t believe how badly I screwed up.”

Rishe shuddered as she realized what Theodore had come up here to do. With an almost playful smile, he began to lean backward against the railing.

“Your Highness, don’t do this!” Rishe lurched over to him, her vision wavering as she fell.

Why now of all times?!

She couldn’t even muster the strength to get back on her feet. Her head pounded like a struck bell.

Theodore looked down at her with a satisfied smile. “Thank you, Sister. I wasn’t expecting your concern to make me happy, but it does.”

“Wait!” She desperately reached out her hand, even though he was meters away. “DON’T!”

A shadow rushed past her.

The figured grabbed Theodore by the arm, yanking him off the railing. Theodore gasped in recognition. “Brother?!” He gazed up at Arnold, stupefied.

Arnold’s back was turned to Rishe, so she couldn’t make out his expression. Still, what he did next surprised her.

Smack!

Arnold grabbed Theodore by the collar and slapped him across the face. “What the hell were you *thinking?*”

Rishe had never heard Arnold shout like that before. Theodore pressed a hand to his cheek, gaping up at his brother.

“I—” Theodore’s voice was choked down to nothing. “Th-this is it. This is the only way I can help you. I’ll never matter to you!”

“Don’t be a fool.” Arnold’s tone was frigid. “What kind of idiot would throw his life away for someone who has never done a single thing to earn his esteem?”

Despite his words, Rishe was sure of her conclusions. Arnold kept Theodore at a distance out of love.

“Don’t do something like this for my sake,” Arnold growled.

Theodore was about to say something, but he gave up, on the verge of tears.

Rishe sighed in relief, forcing herself to her feet. “You’re right, Your Highness. *That* was stupid.”

Arnold slowly looked back at her.

Enduring her throbbing headache, Rishe said, “The feeling behind it is real. It’s not foolish for him to want to help his older brother.” Her breath shook, going shallow. “Isn’t that right, Prince Theodore?”

Theodore now sat on the ground, clenching his fist. “She’s right.”

Arnold blinked. “What are you—”

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted.” Theodore’s numb confusion was gone, replaced by determination. “I want to stand by you. I want you to need me! If there’s any way I can help you, I’ll do it, no matter what.” His eyes—the same eyes—pierced Arnold’s. “Because you’re my only brother, and I care about you.”

Arnold didn’t reply. Rishe wished she could see his face. She watched them both attentively. Before long, Arnold released Theodore’s collar and slowly stood back up.

“Don’t ever do something stupid like this again.”

Theodore grimaced as his brother pushed him away once more. Rishe’s heart ached as she realized these two might never understand each other.

But what Arnold said next surprised her. “I’m pretty sure I’ve told you this once before—don’t put your life in danger needlessly.”

Theodore’s voice trembled as he asked, “You remember that day?”

“Of course I do.”

Theodore choked, tears welling up in those big eyes to trail down his cheeks. His voice quivered. “I’m sorry.” He repeated himself over and over through his tears. “I’m so sorry, Brother. I’m so sorry, Sister. I’m so sor—”

Arnold looked at an utter loss. “Okay, we get it already. Stop crying.”

“But...!”

Rishe felt light with relief. *Thank goodness.* Theodore’s crying face was that of

a small child who had finally plucked up the courage to make amends. *If he can cry like that, he'll be all right.*



Arnold turned to Rishe and knelt down beside her. “Are you hurt?”

“I knew you would come, Your Highness.”

“I came because of something you said.”

She wondered what it was. That Theodore might disappear from Arnold’s life? Perhaps it had sounded like a threat, even if Rishe had been speaking metaphorically. “I’m glad you two have made up.”

Arnold stood in silence and held out his gloved hand to Rishe. She smiled as she took it. The taut string of tension that had been keeping her on her feet slackened. “I’m really ha...”

“Rishe?”

The strength left her, and she finally lost the fight against unconsciousness.

“Sister?!” Theodore cried out as Rishe fainted.

Arnold caught her the moment she went limp. Theodore jumped to his feet and wiped away his tears with the cuff of his sleeve, hurrying over.

“Is she okay?! She stumbled earlier, but—”

A guard had told him she’d fainted in captivity. He’d taken it for an act. The possibility that it hadn’t been filled him with horror. “Oh no. Don’t tell me it’s because I locked her up.”

“No, it’s not.” His brother seemed strangely calm as he looked down at Rishe in his arms and murmured, “She’s just sleeping.”

“Wait, really?” He took a closer look. It did indeed seem that she’d just fallen asleep. “Now of all times?!”

Who the heck could fall asleep in a situation like this? Theodore was stunned, but his brother just laughed. He’d never seen a look like that on Arnold’s face before, but it didn’t hurt as much as he’d expected it to. He found this change in his heart curious.

“Theodore.”

His brother's voice pulled him out of his reverie.

"You have a carriage at the ready somewhere, right?"

"Of course I do." He couldn't help his curtness—he wasn't used to speaking to Arnold. "It's waiting for me not too far away. I'll go fetch it if you carry her."

"Thanks." Arnold easily lifted Rishe in both arms. "I'll bring her to rest downstairs until it arrives."

"Um, okay." Theodore nodded, wiping away fresh tears threatening to spill. It was so strange to watch his solemn brother hold someone in his arms.

Now alone on the rooftop, he murmured to himself, "My brother's counting on me to do something."

His cheek stung where Arnold had slapped him, but his chest was warm.

I can't just keep standing around.

After all, he couldn't squander this precious first.

Theodore stood up and moved for the stairs, chasing the hours until dawn.

When Rishe opened her eyes, she found herself in a patch of sunlight.

To be more precise, she was in a bed bathed in light. Enveloped in silky sheets on a soft mattress, she felt as though she were in a dream. Distantly, she heard the comforting scratch of a pen. She listened to it, feeling sleepy again.

Wait, a pen?

Eventually, the strangeness hit her, and she lifted herself up. Arnold sat working at the desk. *Huh?*

Arnold stilled his pen and gave her an amused smile. "Oh? Finally awake?"

"P-Prince Arnold?!" Rishe sat up with a bounce, hands planted behind her on the bed as she looked around wildly.

"You don't have to get up. Feel free to sleep a bit longer. You've only slept for half a day."

"Half a day? What do you mean?"

This was her room in the detached palace, no doubt about it. To keep her from floundering, Arnold explained, “You passed out on the rooftop of that building. I brought you here in Theodore’s carriage, and I couldn’t just leave you alone after all that. Your maids didn’t know what happened; they wouldn’t have known how to take care of you.”

“W-wait, don’t tell me you’ve been here the whole time? Have you slept any yourself?”

“I would have been awake anyway. I had work to finish.”

“I’m so sorry I fainted!” Rishe bowed as well as she could from a sitting position. She realized as she did that she was wearing a nightgown instead of her torn dress.

Wait, why am I wearing this? Who changed my clothes?

“Don’t worry. I had that maid come in. Elsie, I think her name was?”

Rishe sighed in relief, not even annoyed that he’d done his usual mind reading. She watched as Arnold stood up and came over to the bed.

“How are you feeling?” he asked gently.

Having him and his handsome face so close made her feel self-conscious. “I’m fine now. Sorry to be a bother.”

“I don’t care as long as you recover.”

Arnold held out a letter to her. Rishe opened it to find familiar handwriting—it must have been from Theodore.

Dear Sister,

I’d like to apologize for the terrible things I did. There are too many to count, but I’ll do my best. I swear that someday I will repay my debt to you, and I’ll lend you the aid of the people of the slums. If you can give the people of the undercity a place to belong, then you can count on us whenever you need us. You better be grateful.

Rishe smiled wryly. She appreciated the offer, but she’d prefer to never be in a position to require aid.

P.S. Thank you.

Rishe traced the letters with her fingertip. "You and Prince Theodore had a talk, didn't you?"

Arnold frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"If you hadn't, you wouldn't be the one handing me this letter."

Arnold said nothing, but his lack of denial made her sure she was right. The letter eased her mind, at least for now. Perhaps this was a small change in this life from the last six, shrinking the distance between the two brothers. She couldn't prevent the happy grin from spreading over her face.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Arnold asked.

"I'm pleased. Why wouldn't I want my husband on good terms with his family?"

"Sometimes I think you're the strangest woman I've ever met," Arnold said, his eyes downcast, mouth softer than usual.

That pleased her too. In fact, she was very happy with this whole turn of events.

Arnold looked back up. "I forgot to mention. Think up something that you want. A penalty."

"A what?" Did he want to...buy her something?

"I broke my promise again," he said. "I touched you."

"Huh?"

"You gave me permission at the party to touch you with gloves on, but this was different."

What was he talking about? Rishe cocked her head, puzzled. He always wore black gloves. He was wearing them right now.

Finally, it hit her. "Oh." He was talking about that night a week ago in the chapel. Arnold had been wearing gloves, but he hadn't touched her with his hands.

Rishe's face burned. *He touched me with his lips.*

“I-I don’t need anything!” Flustered, she snatched the sheets to hide her face. Arnold’s smile went distinctly sly.

“You could just tell me why...” she trailed off.

“Why I did that?”

“Never mind!”



She *did* want to know, but she couldn't help denying it. That night had been weighing on her nerves increasingly ever since. It had made last night even more difficult. She'd resolved to speak to Theodore, but she'd frozen at the sight of Arnold. She'd been so relieved when he'd acted like nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Maybe it didn't mean anything?! Or maybe it did? I don't know! And that's why I've tried so hard not to think about it!

"Rishe."

"Now what?" Rishe revealed only her eyes for glaring.

Arnold chuckled. "I'm sorry about all the trouble my brother caused."

Rishe could barely believe she was hearing this. Words spoken by a true older brother who felt a sense of responsibility and sympathy for his sibling. She wished Theodore could have heard.

Rishe shook her head. "It was no trouble at all. He'll be my little brother soon too."

Arnold looked briefly surprised, then pleased. "That's true."

"Mm-hmm."

The burning flush had gone down, but Rishe's heart was still pounding. The feeling was strange. She wasn't sure if she liked it.

In the grand scheme of things, today might be trivial. But it was with these little things, one after another, that she would change the future.

Or so she prayed.

That evening, Arnold's attendant, Oliver, rubbed his forehead in consternation as the prince summarized the day's events. "So, all that's really happened is Prince Theodore becoming Lady Rishe's ally."

"And that troubles you?"

"You know it does." When Arnold didn't respond, Oliver dropped his voice to a murmur. "Your brother is no ordinary prince. He is a king in his own right to

the underclass, all those who flirt at the edges of legality and treason.”

“So it would seem.”

“What’s more, the young women of the palace adore Lady Rishe. And now she has connections to the Aria Trading Company as well, which has been spreading its influence all over the world. She has the servants, a guild, your brother, and the people he commands.” Oliver counted on his fingers the personal connections their future crown princess had made within the scant few weeks she had been in Galkhein. “What else could she be doing other than building out her faction?”

A faction that could, in time, become a threat.

Arnold did not appear concerned. “So what? I far prefer this to my future wife finding herself alone and helpless.”

“But Your Highness—” Oliver bit off his entreaty. If Arnold was allowing it, he had his reasons. Resigned, Oliver heaved a sigh. “Very well. All shall be as you will. Also, something arrived for you.”

He presented the prince with the letter. Arnold grimaced at the impression in the wax seal before breaking it and giving it a swift glance. He grunted and handed it back. Oliver bowed reverently as he accepted it, swiftly appraising himself of its contents. It was a missive from an individual of some importance from a distant place.

“Oh my.”

It opened with words of congratulations for Crown Prince Arnold on his betrothal, begging indulgence for the writer’s inability to attend the wedding ceremony in the coming months. Instead, the letter writer intended to visit Galkhein before the ceremony, with a gift.

What now? Oliver rubbed at his temples. *More trouble, that’s what.*

To be continued...

Bonus Story:

The Lullaby of a Heartbeat

RISHE WORKED SWIFTLY AND DILIGENTLY in a bed chamber of the main palace. It was the middle of the afternoon, but the thick navy-blue curtains kept the room dim. She was setting up the perfect environment for a quiet sleep.

I've lit some calming perfumed oils, and the temperature in the room seems fine. It's a bit too bright for sleeping, but I'm sure it won't be much of a bother with the canopy shut.

She wasn't preparing these chambers for herself, however. She looked toward the room's owner and smiled. "Now then, Your Highness. Rest as much as you need to. I'll stay as long as you want me."

From the bed, Arnold scowled.

The previous day, Rische had been abducted and imprisoned by Theodore, staying up all night. The two brothers had managed to settle some of their differences, and she had fallen asleep from relief.

Awakening just thirty or so minutes ago, she learned that Arnold had been up even longer, staying by her side the whole time. She had thanked him and urged Arnold to rest as well, but then he had shocked her by saying, "I'll stay up until nightfall."

Rische was dumbstruck by his disregard. "But you've been up for nearly two days! Don't tell me you've got a pile of work from yesterday."

"Oh, I finished all of that while you were asleep," he said, so nonchalant about important matters of state. If he didn't have to work, why wouldn't he rest?

When Rische asked, he answered, "Because I can't sleep during the day. I can hear everyone moving around the palace. I can sense them."

She knew what he was referring to—she had felt it before herself. On the battlefield, your senses sharpened and you'd sit bolt upright at the slightest presence.

But that was just on the battlefield, Rishe reflected.

Rishe had apothecary skills, and she couldn't just let him stay up the entire day because he couldn't fall asleep. Especially since it was for her well-being that he'd kept himself awake. She needed to repay the favor.

"Your Highness," she said to him, "Out of curiosity, do you find it easier to sleep in a room with a consistent brightness rather than one where the lights are incessantly switching on and off?"

"Well, yes. I suppose."

"Sensing a presence should be the same. Detecting someone moving around at a distance prevents a swordsman from their slumber. But if someone remains nearby, it will drown out everyone else and make it easier to fall asleep." Rishe put a hand to her chest as she spoke. "Therefore, I shall lull you to sleep."

After a long silence, Arnold said, "What?"

And now here they were. Arnold lay in bed, pressing a hand to his forehead and saying, "You are extremely bizarre."

"Must I remind you that you agreed to fulfill my wishes when you proposed to me? I'm taking advantage of your kindness for the good of your health." Her pride as an apothecary was at stake.

Arnold opened his mouth to argue, apparently thought better of it, and returned his gaze to the canopy. Rishe placed a chair by the bed and sat down on it.

"Well? Can you sense anyone from a distance now?"

Arnold looked thoughtful. "You're right that I'm focusing on you and not anyone else, yes."

Well, that makes this suddenly more awkward.

But at least her tactic worked. The perfumed oils would likely help as well.

"Close your eyes and sleep," she said in a whisper. To her surprise, Arnold obeyed.

Rishe stayed as still as possible to avoid disturbing him. In her fifth life, she'd gotten good at sitting without movement for an extended period of time.

She hoped he could at least get a short nap in. The gentle fragrance of the oils and a quiet, dim room. A bed fit for royalty. It should've been a more than suitable environment for someone who had stayed up all night.

But thirty minutes later, Arnold let out a sigh.

"No good?"

"It's the same thing as always." He didn't sound sleepy at all.

"Are you not tired enough to sleep? Your breathing sounds slower than normal."

"I'd much rather do something productive than just lie around wasting time."

"No, no. You can't get up." She pressed Arnold back down to the bed.

I'm sure it must be because he can't stop thinking. It's hard to fall asleep when your body is tired, but your mind is still busy. I've got to find some way to distract him.

Patients needed rest. Her former teacher would've scolded her if she allowed him to leave.

She thought for a moment before she very quietly asked, "Shall I lie beside you for a bit?"

Arnold looked briefly annoyed, but he agreed. He wasn't giving up yet, for her sake. Relieved, Rishe clambered up and flopped right down beside him. The bed was soft, and it didn't creak at all when she bounced on it. Arnold was suddenly so close, and the two of them gazed at each other.

"Forgive me," Rishe said, slowly reaching out her hand, searching for Arnold's heartbeat. She patted his chest.

Pat, pat. Pat, pat. She kept going.

"What in the world are you doing?"

"It's a soothing method. You simulate a heartbeat." She had done it before for the young daughters of the family she served as a maid. "It helps babies fall

asleep.”

“Babies,” Arnold repeated.

Silence fell between them, giving Rishe the time to reflect that comparing her fiancé to a baby was kind of rude.

But he was just looking at her. “You’re the only one who’d ever dare to treat me like this.” The tenderness in his voice lit a small fire in her heart, warmth spreading through her chest.

What is this feeling? she wondered. But now wasn’t the time to interrogate it.

The prince lay on his back with his eyes closed. As she gazed at his handsome profile, she realized she could see the nape of his neck. Arnold typically kept his collar buttoned up, but right now he wore loose clothes, his numerous scars on display.

“If you’re so curious about it, I won’t stop you.”

Even with his permission, she still hesitated. Gently, she touched the scarring with her fingertips. She’d touched them before—at the party, through thin gloves. Feeling them now confirmed what she’d already known. *Deep, knotted scars.*

Just before she died in her last life, she’d been able to land a single strike on Arnold because the scar tissue on his shoulder slowed the movement of his arm. It was his only weakness.

Despite that, last night he took off the jacket he uses to hide them. He gave it to me.

Rishe and Theodore had been the only ones there, but one never knew where enemies were lurking. He’d trusted them.

Arnold’s eyes were still closed. Even in the dim room, his profile was flawless. Not just his face—his prominent Adam’s apple, his collarbone. The scars didn’t mar his beauty at all.

He looks like a work of art, but he’s flesh and blood.

Why was he so willing to let her touch a part he knew she could use against him? That’s all she could think about as she caressed the scars with a smooth

fingertip.

“Hey.” He grasped her wrist with a big hand.

“Oh!”

His grip on her wrist wasn’t tight, but he was frowning. “What do you—”

“S-sorry. Was I tickling you?” she said, though she felt oddly reluctant to stop.

Arnold’s expression was briefly conflicted, before he grinned. “I suppose I should have kept my gloves on.”

“What? Why?” He was about to go to sleep. Why would he need gloves?

Arnold leaned close and whispered, “Then I could touch you back.”

Rishe’s face burned. “Gloves aren’t a loophole, you know!”

Arnold’s grin spread. “I was just kidding.”

He then released her wrist. He’d been holding her over the sleeve of her dress, keeping his promise not to touch her after all.

He’s so honest. Or maybe “faithful” is the word.

Where did that leave Rishe? It felt unfair that she could touch him without reciprocation. After a moment’s contemplation, she reached for the thin ribbon at her collar and pulled it loose. And then she looked at Arnold. “Here, go ahead.”

Arnold smile slid from his face. “Go ahead what?”

“I touched your neck, so I thought...fair is fair,” Rishe explained quickly.

It was just skin, but intentionally baring it to him made her feel, well, exposed. But it was only right.

“N-not that I think it’s any compensation.” She stared at the sheets rather than at him. “But feel free to take your revenge.”

Arnold silently reached behind himself and grabbed one of the numerous pillows on the bed. He placed it on Rishe’s head.

“Mmph?!”

“What’s your angle?”

“Hey! Wait! Your Hi—” He pressed down to drown out her protests. He wasn’t smothering her, but he *was* messing up her hair. “Your Highness!” She finally threw the soft pillow off and gasped.

Arnold’s handsome face was *right there*. They were close enough for their noses to touch.

He chuckled. “That expression is more than enough compensation.”

“Huh?” Just what kind of face had she been making? She didn’t have the strength to ask. She continued to gape at him, seeing relish written all over his face.

“You’re so strange. Being near my face bothers you, but hopping into my bed to sleep next to me doesn’t?” he pointed out calmly.

The awkwardness of the situation was slowly dawning on her. She was losing control of this scene. “It’s just...” She hesitated. “I wanted to use a charm on you.”

“A charm?”

Rishe nodded, took a deep breath, and reached toward Arnold where he lay on top of the soft sheets. She began patting him again to the rhythm of a heartbeat. Doing this to a child reminded them of hearing their mother’s heartbeat in the womb, calming them down.

“This palace isn’t a battleground. It’s your home, right?” She didn’t know him well. For all she knew, Arnold *might* see the palace as a theater of war. But the thought of him not even being able to relax in his own bedroom saddened her. “I just want to help you sleep.”

Arnold didn’t respond.

Rishe had no memory of the time between falling asleep on the roof and waking in her bed, but she recalled her fear as the strength went out of her, cut with the relief of finding Arnold at her side, watching over her as she slept.

In that moment, she felt safe.

She meant to repay him for that peace, however she could. Even if it was a losing battle.

Arnold continued to gaze at Rishe as she pondered this. “In that case—” He smoothed a strand of hair away from her cheek, careful not to touch her face. “You’ll have to stay here with me until I fall asleep.”

Rishe looked back at him. “Are you sure I won’t be a bother?”

“I can concentrate on just you if you’re here, right?” Slowly, Arnold shut his eyes once more, voice going husky with exhaustion. “I prefer your presence to being alone.”

Rishe smiled. “Okay.”

She didn’t say anything after that, just kept beating out a heartbeat with her palm. Soon enough, Arnold’s breaths went long and deep.

His peaceful breathing was so pleasant that she found herself dozing off as well.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH for reading *7th Time Loop: The Villainess Enjoys a Carefree Life Married to Her Worst Enemy!* My name is Touko Amekawa.

This book was the first chapter in the tale of a heroine who maxed out her skills in different jobs with each loop and then carried her stats over (endurance and strength excluded) into each life thereafter until her current one as a bride. It brings me great joy to have so many people read it.

Wan☆Hachipisu was the artist for the illustrations. Thank you so much for drawing such charming characters, starting with Rishe and her pretty looks, expressions, and dresses—and Arnold, a man so attractive it can never be forgotten.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my editor for all their support.

And I would especially like to give a big thank you to the people who read the web version. It's because of your support that this wonderful dream could come true.

Thank you so, so much!

There will also soon be manga version that will be drawn by Hinoki-sensei. It's a dramatic manga packed with vigor and high-octane emotions, not to mention overflowing with beauty and charm!

I'd love it if you gave it a read, and I hope you'll pick up Volume 2!



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